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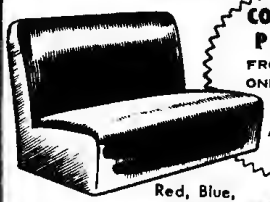
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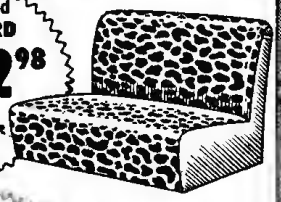


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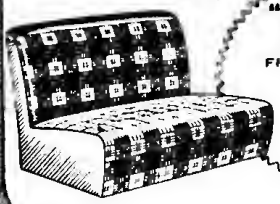
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Vol. 26, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JULY, 1952

A Complete Novel

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STARTLING STORIES. Published every month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1952, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In corresponding with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. July, 1952, issue. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Lee ANNOUNCES

Chetopa Twill

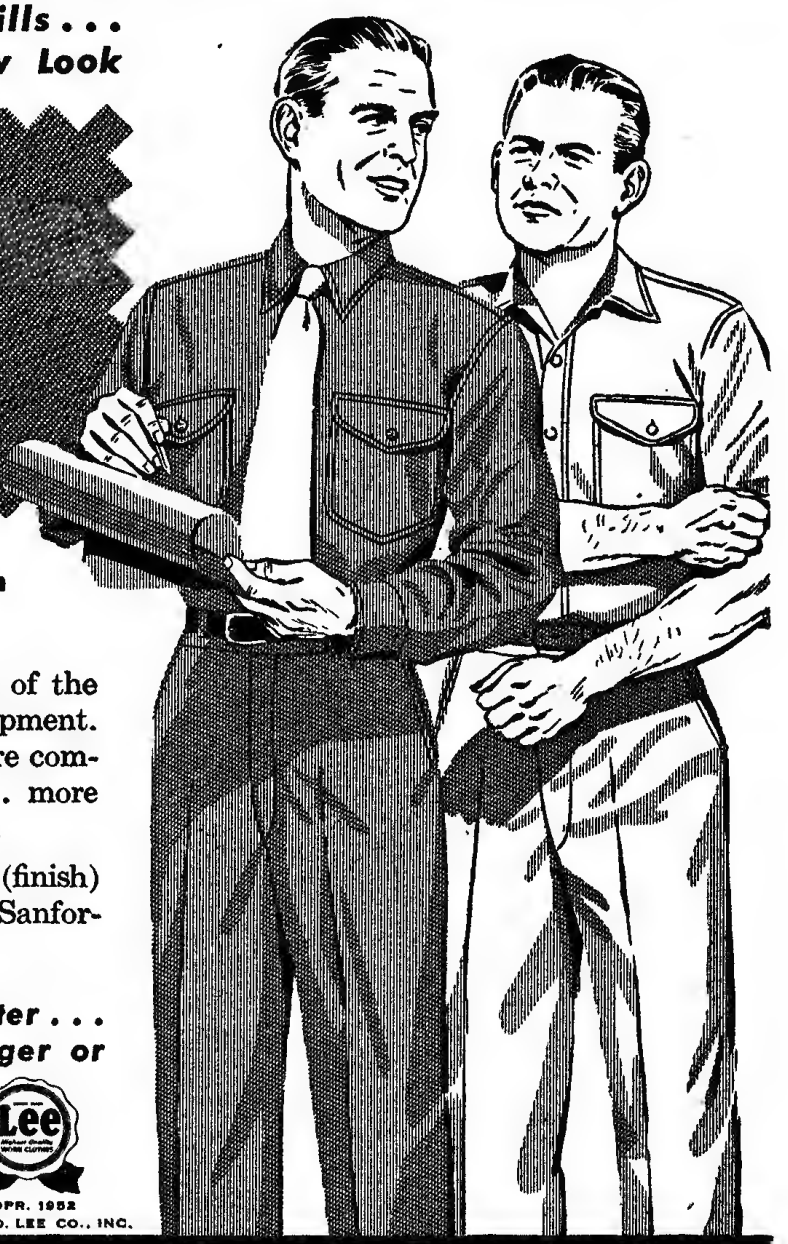


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A Science Fiction Department Featuring Letters from Readers

READERS with tenacious memories will recall that last month we examined the prospects of man's eating himself off the planet and being forced to migrate in search of new worlds of food, if nothing else. Our conclusion was that, according to presently available information, the danger appeared exaggerated. Earth seems capable of supporting, quite comfortably, a much larger population than it now maintains. If you were hoping that ended the subject, don't relax; there is still a relevant point or two left as open as a Congressman's mind.

From homo sap's past performance in breeding, it has been ascertained that the population of a country with a scale of living similar to the United States will double itself about every 110 years. Assuming we ran between 150,000,000 and 160,000,000 people in 1950, we should be topping 300,000,000 by the year 2060 and 2,500,000,000 by the year 2400. This is more than the entire population of the world today. And if other countries increase at only the same rate, the globe will really be groaning in a few hundred years.

It's Not Guesswork

Actually, the birth rates of countries with a lower scale of living are much higher than that of the U.S. and similar nations. But does it seem likely that mankind can continue to breed at the same astonishing pace? Only a few hundred years ago the globe was comparatively empty of humans.

Fortunately we needn't fall back entirely upon guesswork in estimating population trends. There is a method—a method which is applicable to all life processes. It stems from research which began with Dr. Raymond Pearl's now famous experiments in breeding fruit flies.

Starting with a single pair in a bottle, Dr. Pearl observed that they figuratively exploded into reproduction. Because they breed so rapidly and the generations are short, Dr. Pearl had hundreds of generations in a month and the strain was eugenically old. Then came the payoff. The mad pace of reproduction tapered off. In spite of continued ideal living conditions, plenty of food, no disease, the rate of increase slowed and came to a halt. The population grew no further, the numbers had reached a maximum and went no further.

Plotted on graph paper, the line of Drosophilidae increase assumed the shape of an upright S. This S has now become famous. It has been shown to contain more significance than a pound of uranium. It is a map of the law which controls all living organisms or life groups. From it can be predicted, with surprising accuracy, the rise and decline of anything that lives and grows.

The shape and pitch of the lower half of the S predicts the upper portion. By projecting it into the future you can see when the curve begins to flatten out and start down.

Growth and Decline

All living things have a period of growth, a peak, and an eventual decline. This is easily understood in the case of an individual who passes the crest of his powers and slides into old age. But why should a group or race, constantly replenishing itself with new individuals, lose its vigor and become old as a unit? Whatever the cause, it happens to all living organisms, even to diseases.

The S curve has been applied to the career of cancer by the American Cancer Society. Beginning in 1900, with about 50,000 cases a year, the growth of the disease has shown the characteristic S shape. By projecting it into the future it can be seen that barring the discovery of a cure, cancer will continue on the upgrade until about the year 2000. It will have reached 325,000 cases a year by then and simultaneously

(Turn to page 8)



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be intentionally, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

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Scribe G.E.T. The Rosicrucians, AMORC.
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

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have reached old age. The top of the S will start to flatten out and down the reverse curve. Meanwhile, of course, our chances of hitting a cure in the next fifty years continue to improve.

But getting back to populations, suppose we plot the growth of the United States and the world on the S scale? U.S. population shows a normal S curve, still sharply upright as late as 1980. At this point our population should be over 160,000,000. But in the next twenty years the curve begins to flatten out and by the year 2000 will have become stationary at a maximum population of about 175,000,000.

World population, following the same type of curve, will stop climbing about the year 2250, at which time it will have reached a maximum of 4,000,000,000 people.

Maximum Population

If you remember the figures we tossed around so blithely last month, you will recall the estimate that Earth could feed 6,000,000,000 people easily. If the S curve is correct then, maximum world population will be stabilized at a figure well within Earth's capacity to support it. And with that goes one large chunk of reasons for any panicky exodus from earth. However, there are other and better reasons for space flight than mere hunger, which is not a very dignified excuse anyway.

Meanwhile there will be other changes in population. With the birth rate dropping and people living longer, our population will trend to an ever older average. By the time we have passed the year 1980, one out of two people in the U.S. will be 45 or older; one out of six will be past 60.

This means a drastic shift in our national outlook, even in our economic life. We have been a youthful country, our psychology has been slanted to youth. Now the emphasis will be on the middle-aged. Manufacture, entertainment, advertising, books and home-building—all the myriad activities of a large industrial nation will change. Fewer skis will be manufactured and more hammocks. Fewer homes will be needed as fewer new families are established. The large and profitable business of supplying babies' needs will shrink. Schools and school teachers will not be as important. On the other hand there might well be a boom in vacation cruises, in cottages by a lake, in more serious books and movies and television shows.

Another shift in emphasis—women will more and more outnumber men. This may make it very cozy for the remaining males, with women competing madly for them instead of vice versa, but the poor devils may just as well resign themselves to being pushed around even more than they are today.

It's going to be a very different world—for those who stay on it. The others may find lots of good reasons for that hop to Alpha Centauri.

ETHERGRAMS

WE HAD a quaint idea that we were going to serve as referee only in the brawls which spring up like summer squalls in TEV—was that a quaint idea! We seem to be absorbing more punishment than the battlers. Have a look at the latest crop—plus our feeble rejoinders.

THE ACETIC TOUCH
by Elyn Smith

Dear Mr. Mines: Your stirring editorial on sex's place in science fiction has emboldened me to offer my three cents' worth (inflation, you know). Referring to the detective story, A. A. Milne once wrote: "A reader, all agog to know whether the white substance on the muffins was arsenic or face-powder, cannot be held up while Roland clasps Angela's hand 'a moment longer than the customary usages of society dictate.' Much might have happened in that moment, properly spent; foot-prints made or discovered; cigarette ends picked up and put in envelopes . . ." I realize that I seem to have offered Mr. Milne's opinions rather than mine, but I would apply the same criticism to science fiction. There are many, many magazines with scx in them (in fact the hard thing would be to find an appreciable number without), comparatively few featuring science fiction. Why clutter up the science fiction with BEMs holding hands when we could have bigger and better cataclysms instead? Sex is permissible if it's an integral part of the story—if Pthut, the Emperor's brother, is starting an atomic chain reaction on Betelgeuse VI out of pique because the Emperor is wedding the beautiful Jru, thus killing his hopes of the succession, then a hasty proposal might be in order—but, otherwise, no!

Which brings me to the corollary topic of sex as it does exist in current science fiction. Supposing we agree to wait while Roland and Angela hold hands. Why is Angela always a shapely lass of nineteen or twenty, with big blue eyes, golden hair, and perfect features; while Roland is a youth nearing forty, with thinning hair, a wry smile designed to conceal the fact that he has lost his upper plate, and three eyes? Granted that the author is in his eighth lustrum and his barber can do no more for him, why must he do his wish-fulfilling quite so publicly? He may explain his ultrasonic space transmitter with such fidelity to detail that anyone can reproduce it with parts purchased at Wool-

(Continued on page 128)

THEN SERGEANT BILL WENT INTO ACTION...

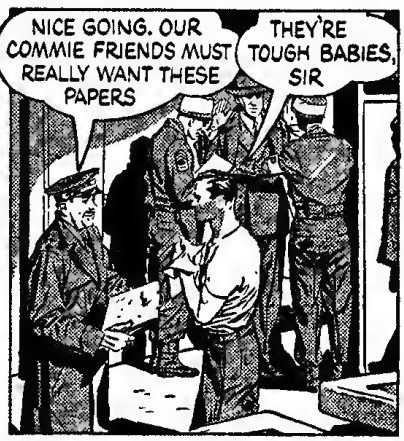


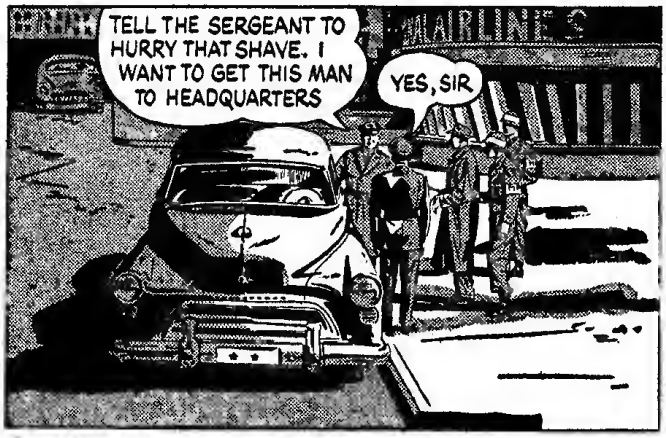
IT'S 6A.M. IN THE NEARLY DESERTED AIRPORT WHEN GENERAL LENNON, OF ARMY INTELLIGENCE, RETURNING FROM WASHINGTON WITH IMPORTANT PAPERS, IS ACCOSTED BY A STRANGER...



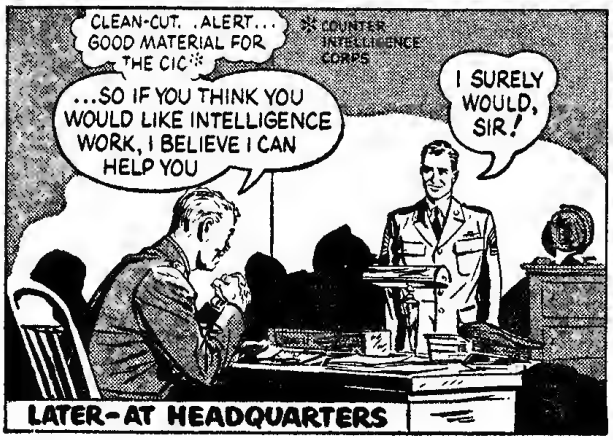
FRESHENING UP BETWEEN PLANES, BILL ELTIN, REGULAR ARMY SERGEANT ON LEAVE, IS THE WASHROOM'S ONLY OCCUPANT...











LATER-AT HEADQUARTERS



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STAINED BY THE BLOOD OF THE WEST'S GREATEST HEROES

One of the frontier's epic adventures brings one of the greatest action spectacles to the screen!

COLOR BY Technicolor



They matched bullet for bullet... kiss for kiss!

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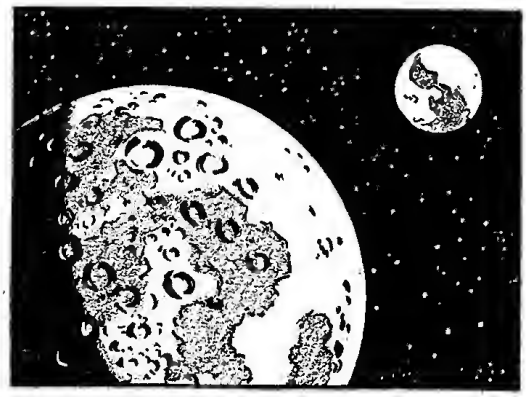
RED MOUNTAIN

Directed by WILLIAM DIETERLE

Screenplay by John Meredyth Lucas, George F. Slavin and George W. George
From a Story by George F. Slavin and George W. George

A PARAMOUNT PICTURE

Les *and* Es Claim THE MOON



WEIRD things happen in fandom, but the current rhubarb between Alex Victor and the Elves, Gnomes and Little Men's Science-Fiction, Chowder and Marching Society, stands close to the top.

Our first awareness that anything was cooking on the moon came in a letter from Lester Cole, advising us that his fan and marching society had done some surveying on the moon with the help of a reputable astronomer and had discovered the presence of the mineral sylvanite, which, Les informs us, is "a gold-silver telluride found in association with igneous rocks." These deposits are located 23.7 miles S37°E of the northern rim of the crater Manners.

The Elves, Gnomes, etc., accordingly had a survey map drawn and laid formal claim with the United Nations to an area on the moon about 30 miles by 60 miles, taking in nine craters. The society petitions the U.N. to issue a patent and title to this area, in consideration of which the Gnomes will assign to the U.N. 90% of all the profits accruing from the development of the sylvanite.

This is an ambitious project for Les and Es, guiding spirits of the Elves, Gnomes, etc., whose other activities have lately been funneled into the publishing of the Rhodomagnetic Digest, since Orgasm suspended.

As a bit of far-sighted pioneering, this bold and original move awes us. But all is not smooth sailing. The next intimation of trouble came with a clipping from the *Los Angeles Evening Herald & Express* sent us by C. E. Floren. It seems that Alex F. Victor, venerable inventor of the Victor Talking Machine, has laid claim to the entire moon, not just a piffling section of nine craters, and is horrified that the Little Men are trying to jump his claim.

"This is illegal," he is reported as saying. "I may take it to the Supreme Court!"

Victor insists he owns the moon as the result of an experiment two years ago in which he bounced some radar off the lunar surface. As sole owner, he envisions an exclusive real estate development, with lots selling at $1000 an acre. However, in a burst of generosity, he offers 10% off to buyers who take more than ten acres at a time. The only reason the price is so low, he points out, is that the property is unimproved and families moving in would face assessments for sewers and things. If the Gnomes and Elves want mineral rights, says Mr. Victor, refusing to recognize the U.N., they will have to buy them from him.

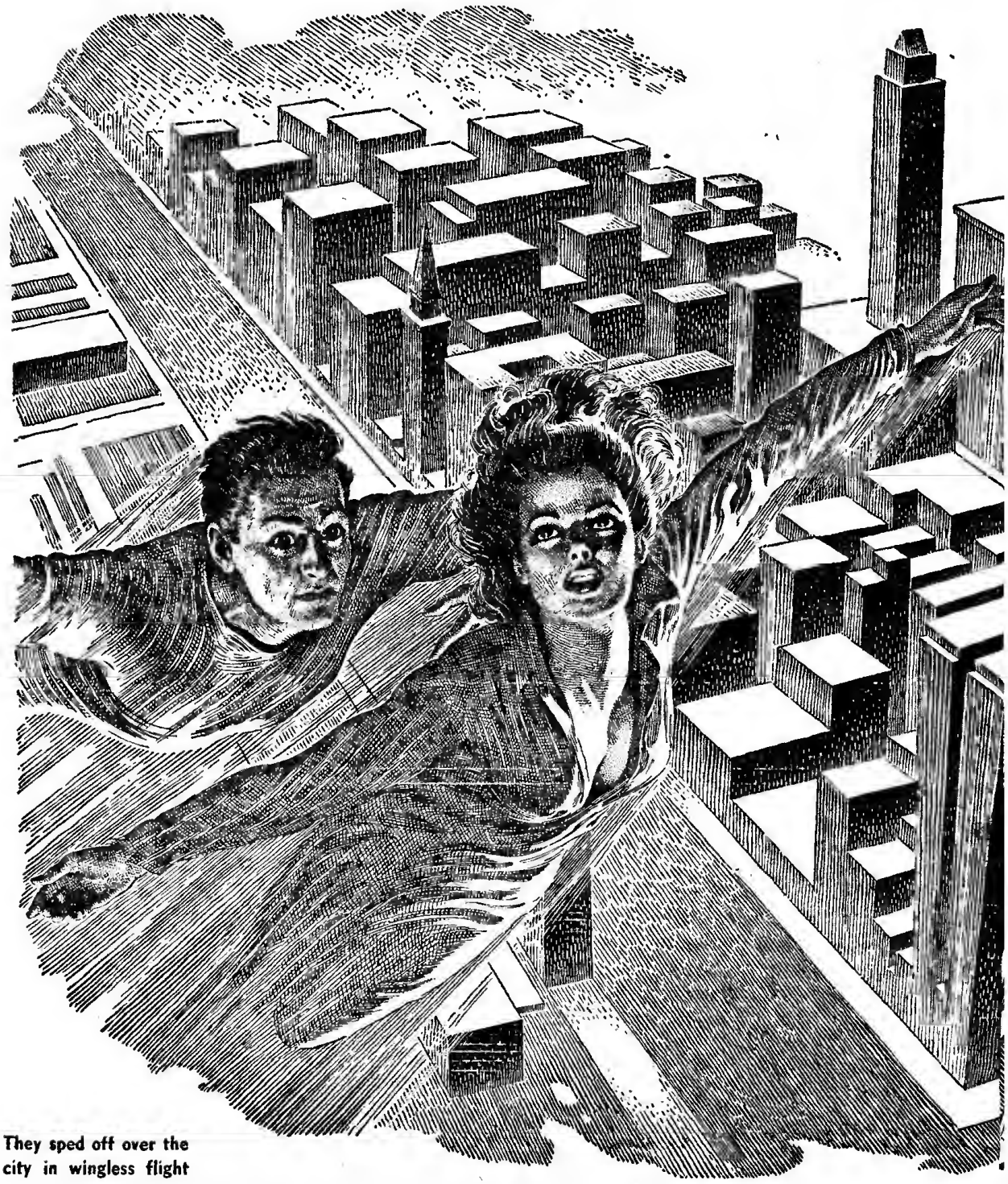
A first class legal brawl is thus shaping up, even before the first moon-bound rocket sputters its way into the stratosphere. As reported in the paper, Les Cole has written to President Truman to try and ascertain *his* stand on lunar matters and claimants thereto.

For the adventurous, the most interesting item is that Alex Victor has offered a flat $1,000,000 to the first man who will make a trip up to inspect his lunar real estate and return.

Anybody want to do a little homesteading, pardners?

Real Estate Is Going Up—All the Way to the Moon!

passport



They sped off over the city in wingless flight

to pax

a novel by KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

I

DORN ROBERTS brought his small ship out of overdrive not far from the Moon. It took only a minute to get a bearing on Terra and then he was streaking toward the planet at top cruising speed. There was an urgency in the way he flipped the sending-switch on Communications, but his thoughts were all on a frivolous little thing he'd suddenly remembered from a Cultural History course:

Mary had a little lamb—

"Dorn Roberts calling A. G. I. Over."

It's fleece was white as snow—

"Dorn Roberts," he repeated in a steady monotone, "calling A. G. I. Over."

And everywhere that Mary went—

"Dorn Roberts calling A. G. I. Over."

The lamb was sure to go—

The receiver hummed with power as it cleared the static from its throat. "This is A. G. I. Where are you? Over."

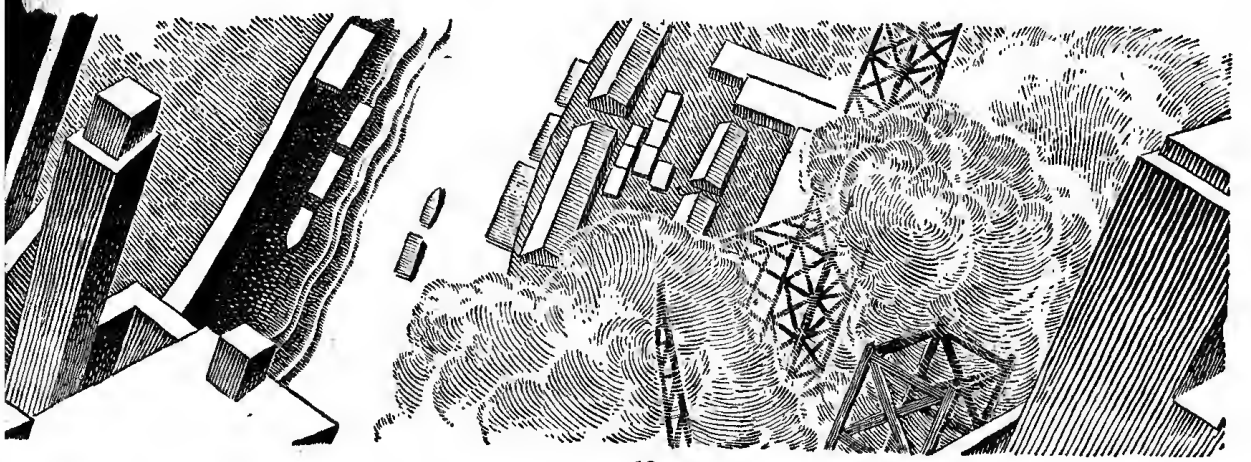
It followed her to school one day—

"Approaching Terra, Moon-side," Dorn said. "Will land in thirty minutes or less, Nyork spaceport. Meet me there. I have the whole story."

Which was against the rule—

"What is it, Dorn?" A new voice was

Jair Holding knew that the sabotage of Galactic Industries stemmed from the world of Nike. But the mystery was—how?



coming in over the receiver. "This is Benson."

It made the children laugh and play—

"Can't talk now. They may get a fix on me. Even this call was dangerous. Out." Dorn Roberts reached over and deliberately cut Communications.

To see a lamb at school—
Little Jack Horner—
Sat in a corner—
Eating his Christmas pie—
He put in his thumb—
And pulled out a plum—
And said what a good boy am I—
—?
Along came a spider—
And—

The Landing-Screen, which had been showing only empty atmosphere and an occasional wispy cloud-fragment, slowly filled with tangible lines. Swiftly they coalesced into the outlines of the Nyork spaceport.

Dorn Roberts swooped once over the huge metal field and dropped the ship gently to within inches of the landing cradle. He cut the power, sighed in relief . . . and then screamed briefly as the small ship spun down through the cloud that for a moment had looked like Nyork and fell earthward.

After a time, the hull reddened and then burst into white-hot flames. Somewhere north of Nyork a small boy, whose grandmother had filled him with old memories, saw the streaking mote and made a wish.

THE MEETING of the Association of Galactic Industries—known all over the galaxy as the A. G. I.—was held in the Star Room of the Mercurian-Astoria Hotel in Nyork. Those members who hadn't been able to reach Terra in time for the emergency meeting, such as Rheel of Betelgeuse, Jhona of Rigel, and Trxl of Polaris, were hooked into the huge wall visiscreen overlooking the room.

Fenning Benson, President of the A. G. I., wasted no time in formalities. His expression was grim as he looked over the group of humans, humanoids, and non-humanoids who represented more than ninety percent of the wealth of the galaxy.

"Fellow Universals," he said, "this full emergency meeting has been called because we are faced with a situation so grave that the Tactical Committee felt it must be referred to the full group. We've just lost our fourth investigator."

"Roberts?" someone asked.

"Dorn Roberts," Benson said, nodding. "The former head of the Bureau of Galactic Investigations and one of the best men the BGI ever trained. He took off for Nike, the first planet in the Regulus System, a month ago. He contacted us this afternoon when he was about thirty minutes out. I spoke to him myself. He claimed that he had the whole story. Twenty minutes later his ship came down in a field just outside of New Boston. The local authorities thought it was a meteor. The ship—and Roberts—were charred to a lump of metal no bigger than my two fists."

"How do you know it was Roberts?"

"Analysis proved it was his ship, after Atmosphere Control plotted the fall and phoned New Boston."

"Didn't Roberts tell you what he'd found when you were in contact?"

"No. He said he was afraid they'd get a fix on him and that even the brief call was dangerous. From this, I think we can guess that they were looking for him and in some way found him before he could reach us." Benson paused impressively. "I have seen the tapes from Atmosphere Control and there wasn't a single strange ship this side of the Moon. Every ship within Terran atmosphere has been checked and cleared. The tape shows that Roberts maneuvered his ship exactly as if landing—when he was at an altitude of more than a hundred miles—and that he then *cut off his power.* The *logical* answer from the known facts is that he came out of overdrive too fast and was suffering from opticmania, the fate of so many untrained pilots. But Dorn Roberts was

not an untrained pilot."

"In other words," said Walker of the Terran Titanium Monopoly, "we've got another murder . . . only we can't prove it."

"Exactly," said Benson. He saw a waving tentacle in the back of the room and squinted until he recognized the face-fringe beneath three eye-stalks. "Yes, Mr. Zygo?"

The head of the Alpheratzian Construction Monopoly inclined his eye-stalks toward the president. "Mr. President," he said with the peculiar lisp

Gullible's Travels

FROM Voltaire to Swift, and around to Cabell, adventure in far places always has been a favorite medium of satirical writers. You can spoof a six-eyed, tentacled BEM from a far galaxy to your heart's content and it would be a brash reader who claimed a resemblance and sued you for libel. And at the same time, by implication, you can get across all sorts of sly innuendoes about the human race which bears undoubted resemblance to BEMS in many fields. And somehow, things humans do in all seriousness sound very funny when attributed to intelligent insects or crocodiles, which points up the irony no end.

There are no BEMS in PASSPORT TO PAX and if you see any resemblance to anyone you know—keep it under your hat.

—The Editor

that marked the attempts of all Alpheratzians to speak Terran, "would you mind filling in for me on the matter of these investigators? I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with the details."

"Don't you ever read our reports?" snapped Benson.

"Who has time to scan reports?" countered the Alpheratzian. "I've spent the past two months in the Spica System where two hundred construction jobs have been sabotaged. I'll be lucky if I make a credit on the whole system."

Several heads and antennae nodded with manifest sympathy throughout the room.

"Very well," Benson said. "I'll start at the beginning. I'm sure that most of you know there is a star system in our galaxy by the name of Regulus. There are two planets, accompanied by one dark satellite, in an orbit around Regulus. These two planets, Nike and Pax by name, are the only two planets within an area ten thousand light-years square which have not joined the Federation. Pax, the second planet, not only refused to join but has refrained from any commerce or even communication with the rest of the galaxy since that time. Nike, on the other hand, has continued to expand industrially throughout the galaxy. Ethnically, both Nikeans and Paxians are homo sapiens similar to Terrans . . . is this what you want, Mr. Zygo?"

The Alpheratzian was impervious to irony. "It is fine, Mr. President," he said calmly. "Better to hear something I already know than miss something of importance. Is it not so?"

"All right," Benson said. "I don't have to tell you that the Nikeans have steadily taken business away from every one of us. They've cut in on a number of our most private deals. They've consistently underbid us. Whoever competes with them has an unusual number of accidents—sometimes as high as seventy percent above normal. Our most recent survey showed that there was not a *single Federation corporation* that

didn't have at least twenty more fires and accidents than is suffered by *any one Nikean corporation.* As early as two years ago, we were all convinced that the Nikeans were causing these accidents."

"We ought to have the whole system quarantined," grumbled Sloma of Vega.

"We'd love to," Benson said with feeling. "But we haven't been able to prove a single thing against any Nikean. Not so much as an unkind thought. And not because we haven't tried."

"To the tune of eleven million credits," Lahni, the Treasurer of A. G. I., said dryly.

Benson nodded. "So long as Nike does business throughout the galaxy they've had to honor our industrial passports. We've sent any number of trade commissions to Nike. They've been reluctantly shown around, but have seen nothing that would give us a lead."

"You mark my words," interrupted Walker. "All of their sabotage is directed from Pax. No planet can be as independent as they pretend."

"Yes," said Benson, "we've thought of that. We hired our first professional investigator a year ago. Johnson was his name. Two days after he landed on Nike, he was arrested by their secret police. At his trial, he confessed to committing sabotage against the government of Nike and of spying for the Federation. As you should know, he was convicted and is now serving a fifty year sentence."

"The Federation should have declared war against them."

"On what basis? We furnished Johnson with an attorney, who reported back to us that there was no evidence that Johnson had been tortured or drugged. And Johnson stuck to his confession every time he talked to the attorney . . . Our next investigator was Lamotti. He committed suicide the third day he was on Nike by stepping through the window of his hotel room. There was absolutely no evidence that this was anything but suicide. Our third investigator was Syoki, formerly with the B. G. I. He never got to Nike. He rammed his space cruiser into an asteroid at full cruising speed. Again, no proof that it was anything but an accident."

"And the fourth investigator was Dorn Roberts?"

Benson nodded. "And after one year and the expenditure of eleven million credits, we are no nearer the truth than we were in the beginning."

There was a moment of silence in the room. Then it was Rheel of Betelgeuse who spoke from the visiscreen.

"Obviously, Mr. Benson," he said, "you have a suggestion to make or you wouldn't have called this meeting."

"I have." Benson hesitated, then said: "It is the considered recommendation of the Tactical Committee that we employ Jair Holding."

THERE was a moment of pandemonium as almost everyone in the room tried to speak at once. It was the Terran Walker who finally got the nod from Benson.

"I'm opposed to it," snapped Walker. "The last time we hired him was three years ago to look into that Marfakian mess. Oh, I'll admit that he cleaned it up, and quickly, but he charged us a half million credits and I'll never forget that report he handed in. Even at best, the man's a sentimental dreamer—any man is who claims that he works by intuition. But on the basis of that report, and the things he said about us, we should have turned him over to the police as a Romantic."*

"We did consult a number of attorneys," admitted Benson, "and were advised not to instigate any action. To have done so would have been to cast light on certain aspects of the Marfakian affair which were—shall we say? —unfortunate."

"Besides," snorted Manners, head of the Visiscreen Combine, "are we inter-

*The Romantics were a small, illegal political party which opposed the interplanetary Monopolies and advocated a return to the purer form of democracy, with governmental curbs on big business.

ested in forcing Jair Holding to respect us or in protecting our interests against those who apparently can do more than call us names?"

"Exactly," Benson said. "Whatever we personally think of Jair Holding, his ability is undeniable. I believe he is the one man who has a chance of proving that the Nikeans and Paxians are deliberately trying to ruin us."

"I agree with Benson and Manners," said Gomez of Venus Copper. "If Holding can deliver for us, let's hire him no matter what he costs and without regard for what he says or thinks. I've had more mine accidents in the past year than I had in the previous ten. It has to be stopped somehow—and I don't care how or by whom—or I'll not be able to meet the price of Nikean copper."

One by one, the members spoke their minds. It was easy to see that most of them shared Walker's emotional attitude, but it was even more obvious that they were desperate. By the middle of the afternoon the issue was settled and Fenning Benson was dispatched to carry out their wishes.

II

JAIR HOLDING was a strange young man, even in the 31st Century which accepted many kinds of strangeness. In a universe where humans were stolidly uniform, he was strikingly handsome and individualistic. Humans and nonhumans alike hardly made a move without the latest scientific or engineering gimmick; Jair Holding trusted nothing but his own impulses. He'd been doing this for so long that he spoke of his "intuition" as others spoke of their ability to take a star-reading. The universe, dominated by an underlying suspicion and hostility, was filled with clubs, fraternities and interplanetary organizations; Jair Holding, who loved all creatures, belonged to no organization and had no friends.

Even more peculiar to those who knew



Cybele burst into flame

him were Jair Holding's business affairs. He rented a small office near the entertainment section in Nyork, from which he operated, more or less, a Personal Observation Bureau. But the office was more often locked than it was open for business, and it was known that he turned down all love cases and industrial spying, the two things that had made many a POB rich. Even within these limitations, he'd demonstrated an ability for success matched only by his complete indifference to it.

Three years before, when he'd collected a half million from the A.G.I., he'd locked up his office and gone off to a remote planet on the other side of the galaxy. He'd returned two years later with just enough money to exist while he waited for another job.

"Spent it,"" he'd explained to an acquaintance who asked about the half million, "trying to find out something about myself. Ran out of money before I succeeded."

"Look, if you really need money, I happen to know that Walker is looking for a POB—"

"No," Jair Holding said. "Not that sort of job. And I'll only take a job when my intuition tells me it's the right job."

"Intuition," snorted the acquaintance. "You know very well the Galactic Analytical Society has proved there is no such thing as intuition. What sort of nonsense is that?"

"That's what I spent a half million trying to find out," Jair said with a grin. "All my life I've had intuitions—call them feelings, if you like—about what I should or shouldn't do. Nearly always they've been right. Recently the feelings have sometimes been stronger—almost like someone speaking to me, only without any sound. That's why I went to Ledo—*something* told me to. So I spent two years thinking about myself."

"Thinking? *That* cost a half million?"

"Round trip charter took most of it. Ledo is seventy-three thousand light years from Terra."

"Well," said the acquaintance, "you keep on this way and you'll end up on one of the satellites for the insane around Jupiter!"

Holding remembered this conversation as he stared out the window of his office. He grinned wryly, for he knew that his present actions, if viewed coldly on the record, were enough to win him a Satellite-Certificate. He was down to his last two hundred credits and was about to spend one-fourth of that for the privilege of looking at a beautiful woman.

A light flickered, indicating an incoming visiphone call. Jair stared at it thoughtfully for a moment and then moved deliberately to the door.

He was just locking the office when the door across the corridor opened and a Miaplacidusian, his sonic-antennae quivering, looked out. After a moment he spotted Jair and there was a strange soundless vibration in the corridor. Although it was on too high a frequency for human ears, he was automatically transmitting the sound of friendly intentions.

"Ah, Mr. Holding," he said. "I—ah—believe someone is trying to reach you on the visiphone."

"I know," Jair said cheerfully. "But I'm on my way to *The Asteroid* for a late lunch. If the call is important, it'll be made again. It it isn't, why bother?"

"True," the Miaplacidusian said solemnly. He sighed. "You know, it is very difficult to do one's work when one perceives every visiphone call that's being made. I believe that one of my major criticisms of Terra is the number of visiphone sets in use."

"I agree with you," Jair said.

The Miaplacidusian peered nearsightedly at Jair. "You know, Mr. Holding, you are really quite intelligent for a Terran. While I've enjoyed knowing you, I must confess that you've given me considerable extra work. I've had to add any number of footnotes to my study of Terra in order to explain the single exception I've found."

"So sorry," Jair said, grinning. "Well, keep your sound up." He waved and went down the corridor.

THE *ASTEROID* was a smart restaurant-club which was said to offer the best entertainment in Nyork. The first show went on in midafternoon and was repeated thereafter at regular intervals until shortly after the dinner hour. Since it catered to the afternoon and early evening crowd, its show contained none of the exotic acts which were to be seen in other clubs later at night.

Jair Holding arrived in time to order his lunch before the show started. He ate calmly, ignoring the first three acts. It was only when Cybele Rilka was announced that he turned his attention to the floor.

Cybele Rilka was billed simply as a Mind Reader, which many considered an understatement. She was a tall, voluptuous girl, with golden blonde hair swirling down over her shoulders. When working, she wore tight, off-the-waist gowns which effectively demonstrated that she used no concealed electronic aids—in fact, it had been remarked that she concealed neither mechanical nor natural endowments. Since the remarks were generally made by other women, they had little influence on the enjoyment of her male audience—an audience which included nearly every human, and a number of non-humans, in the galaxy.

Every afternoon of the two weeks she'd been at *The Asteroid* had found Jair Holding at one of the tables. He'd originally been interested only in her mind-reading, but along about the fourth day he'd decided that it was all trickery and his interest had switched to the more obvious fact of her beauty. Neither of his interests had received much encouragement. She had never stopped at his table to demonstrate her mind-reading ability, and she'd refused to see him on his daily visits to her dressing room.

Although he was not aware of it, the first part of her act varied little in form from the way mind-readers had performed for centuries. Cybele Rilka stood in all her feminine glory on a small revolving platform which was three feet higher than the regular floor. A jewel-encrusted, eyeless mask fitted over her eyes. A soft blue light flooded over her. There was little chance, Jair thought, of any man in the place looking for trickery while he could gaze at that vision.

Cybele's assistant, who was also her maid—a dark, plain-looking girl wearing a full robe loosely knotted at the waist—circled the room, stopping to take an object from a man at a table.

"Please indicate the object which has been handed me," she called out. "I will hold it up by the margin so that everyone may see it."

A tiny spotlight swept over their heads to pinpoint the pocket index the girl held up.

"It is a pocket index," Cybele said. Her voice was always indifferent, with sultry tones that matched her figure. "The indexer is set to open to the name —of—Marge . . . shall I go on, sir, or is your wife with you tonight?"

There was light laughter at the man's expense, and the assistant returned his index. She moved on.

Jair Holding nodded to himself. After the first time, he'd gone to the encyclotape room of the library and studied up on the methods of mind-readers. He recognized the clues: indicate—index, margin—Marge. He was disappointed, but he still admired the showmanship.

THE ASSISTANT had stopped beside another table. "I am looking at an object," she called out, "which this gentleman refuses to turn over to me. This one may be difficult, so take your time."

There was an attitude of strain about the slowly-revolving figure. "The object is round—and I believe there are numbers around it. Yes." Her voice grew more certain. "It is a dial—the dial of a safe. The rest of the safe is out of the temporal phase. Apparently

the gentleman doesn't trust anyone since he carries his safe with him wherever he goes."

There was scattered laughter.

"Wait," Cybele called. "I'm getting more. The combination which will bring the safe back to full temporal phase is—"

"No, no," shouted the man. "A thousand credits if you don't say it."

They laughed loudly at him as Cybele gestured for the girl to go on.

Jair Holding was aware that someone had slipped into a chair at his table, but he did not look around.

"Doing a little Personal Observation, I see," a voice said dryly.

"Sure," Jair said. He recognized the voice, even after three years, and he still didn't turn. "Know anything more deserving of observation? Was it you who tried to phone me about thirty minutes ago, Benson?"

"It was," said the president of the A. G. I.

"How did you find me? I left no door-tape."

"That animated barrel who has the office across from you. He told me that you were here having lunch. It looks to me as if he had your appetites confused."

"Your mind's always in a gutter," Jair said, "although usually it's there in order to pick up somebody's money. Why are you interested in my appetites, Benson?"

"We have a job for you, Holding."

"No, thanks. Why don't you do something useful with your money—such as buying me that?" He nodded toward the girl beneath the blue spotlight.

Fenning Benson looked at the girl. "She could be bought," he said as though they were discussing a labor-robot. "We'll pay you enough money so that you can buy her, if you like."

Jair looked at his companion for the first time. "You don't understand, Benson. I don't want to work for you. I don't like you or your organization or what you stand for. And if I were sure you were right about her, I wouldn't want her."

"Then you can buy something else with the money." Benson stared steadily at him. "We're willing to pay a lot of money."

"No. I took that Marfakian job for you because the lives of innocent people were at stake, not because I wanted to do anything for A. G. I. Not even because I wanted your money."

"There are lives at stake in this too," Benson said softly. "I don't know the exact figure, but I'd say that at least a billion galactic citizens have died in unexplained accidents and fires. We've hired four investigators to find out how. One of them is in prison. Three have been murdered, although we can't prove it. The last was killed today, right after he'd sent word that he had the answers."

"Maybe someone read his mind," Jair said sourly, still looking at Cybele Rilka.

"Nonsense," snapped Benson. "You know very well that the analytical society has scoured the universe looking for XSP and we've got robots that can make better scores on XSP cards than anyone they've found. That young lady is a success because of what she puts in men's minds, not what she extracts."

"I expect you're right," Jair said. He sighed heavily. "Who do you think has been killing your investigators?"

"Nike and Pax in Regulus. They're slowly taking business away from every firm in the Federation."

JAIR grinned. "Beating you at your own game, is that it? Is that why you're so anxious to pin something on them?"

"Yes," Benson said frankly. "But not just to pin *something* on them. We know they're back of the increase in industrial accidents. There is no other explanation for the increase—and there are no other planets in competition with us. This month alone, there were two hundred thousand fatalities in these accidents, Holding."

"I thought Pax hadn't been offering any competition. How come you're including them?"

"They haven't—directly," Benson admitted. "They haven't even traded with any other planet. So far as we know, there's never been a Paxian on any planet outside of their system. And no one from the Federation has ever set foot on Pax—unless it was Dorn Roberts, the man who was killed today. Yet we feel certain that the sabotage must somehow be directed from Pax. Nothing has ever been spotted on Nike."

"Directed how?"

"We don't know. The only guess anyone has made that makes any sense is that they've found some way of controlling cosmic energy. Pax may be the laboratory for the system and that's why they're so secretive. But you can bet they're up to something. No one is that secretive without a good reason."

"What would you want me to do?"

"Go to Pax and find out what's causing the accidents and how to stop them. We're not asking you to do anything about the Nikean competition. We can stand competition—but not destruction and murder."

"How would I get to Pax?"

"That would be up to you," Benson admitted. "We can make sure that your industrial passport is all right for Nike and they can't keep you out of there unless they want to have trouble. But once you're on Nike, it's up to you. We don't know of any way to get to Pax."

"Has it ever occurred to you," Jair asked slowly, "that it's peculiar that they've gotten on to every one of your investigators? There must be some sort of leak in your organization."

Benson nodded. "I've thought that for some time. I've checked every angle without discovering anything. That's part of the risk, Holding."

III

JAIR WAS quiet for a minute, staring across the floor at the figure of the mind-reader. He knew that his sympathies had already been aroused—not for the men who were losing their money but for those who were losing their lives—but he still wasn't sure he wanted the job. Then—suddenly—he felt an urge to take it. It was a thing that had happened to him often. He'd called it intuition, but it was more tangible than that; it seemed almost as if someone were giving him a soundless message, and for a moment he thought that this time it would be cleared and he'd know from whom it came. But the knowledge skated around the periphery of his mind, and was gone.

"All right," he said to Benson. "I'll take the job—if you'll meet my terms."

"We are prepared to do so," Benson said.

"One million credits."

Benson hesitated only a second. "All right."

"One million credits," repeated Jair, "win, lose, or draw. In other words, I want the money deposited to my credit here before I leave."

Benson's hesitation was longer this time, but it didn't change his final answer. "Very well, Holding. We'll do it."

"How much cash do you have right now?" Jair demanded.

Fenning Benson brought out his wallet and put the sheaf of bills on the table. He spread them with his forefinger.

"Four thousand, thirty credits," he said.

Jair Holding reached over and separated one ten-credit note from the others. He put the remainder in his pocket.

"That's enough to get you home," he said. "You can credit me with the rest as an advance. Now, run along and leave me alone. I'll see you in a day or two."

Benson glanced toward the girl on the floor. "That's not enough to buy her," he said.

"And I told you that if she's for sale I'm not interested," Jair said. "Blast off."

He waited until Benson was gone and then turned and watched the show until Cybele Rilka left to the tune of thundering applause. He waited another ten minutes before calling for his check. He paid the bill and threaded his way through the tables toward the back of the club.

The maid opened the dressing room door in answer to his knock. For a minute they stared at each other without speaking. For the first time, in a half-conscious way, Jair was aware that the maid, with her high cheek bones, full mouth and darkling look, possessed a different beauty. Something about the way she stood suggested that the body beneath the shapeless robe might be shaped in its own cunning fashion, but the vision was quickly lost as he caught a rustle of movement from beyond the door.

It was Jair who first broke the silence. "Hello, honey," he said. "I'm here for my daily blast-off."

To his surprise the maid stepped to one side. "Miss Rilka has said you may come in."

His surprise was so great that for a moment Jair continued to stand there. Then he stepped hastily inside, feeling that the maid was amused at him even though her face was as inscrutable as ever.

CYBELE RILKA sat before her dressing table, giving a critical look to one thin eyebrow. When she finally consented to glance up, it was to stare past him at the maid.

"You may go, Caristia," she said.

Jair felt, rather than heard, the door close. He looked at Cybele Rilka and saw the flicker of a challenge in her eyes.

"You are very persistent, Mr. Holding," she said.

"It's an old family custom," Jair said lightly. "My grandfather always told me never to let money or a beautiful woman get away from me. I've sometimes neglected the first commandment, but never the second."

She seemed amused. "Only sometimes?" she asked, looking at him from beneath lashes. "From what I've heard, you've had only one job the last year and before that none for two years. Perhaps your Personal Observing has been too personal."

"How did you learn that?" Jair asked.

"You forget that I'm a mind-reader."

"And you forget that I've seen your act," Jair said. "The maid isn't around to throw you cues now. So how did you know?"

Cybele picked up a brush and passed it over her gleaming hair. "When you were so persistent, I thought to find out about you. So one afternoon I had a nice long talk with that sweet little Miaplacidusian who has the office across from you."

"That sweet little Miaplacidusian talks too much," muttered Jair. He looked at her and saw the twinkle in her eye. They laughed together. "Is that why you decided to see me today?" he asked. "You decided I was harmless?"

"Not harmless, but interesting." The sultry tones of her voice gave all sorts of new meanings to the word.

"Have dinner with me?" Once again he had cause to be glad for his sudden impulses; without the most recent one he wouldn't have had enough money to ask her to dinner.

"A late dinner," she said. "I must run a few errands after my last show here. Do you mind?"

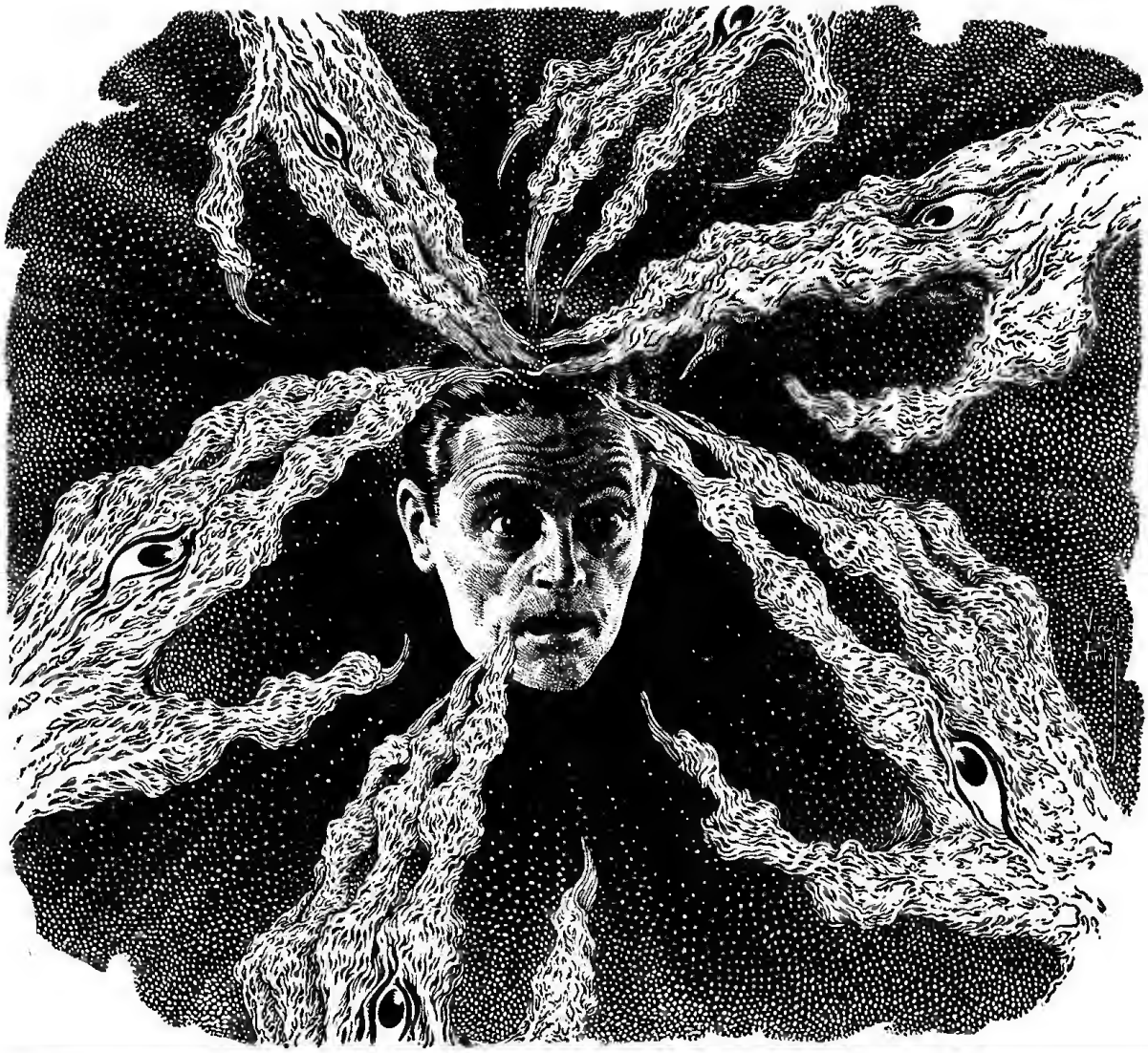
"Of course not. Where shall I pick you up?"

A small frown marred the perfection of her forehead. "Where do you live—Jair?"

He named the small apartment house which was not far from the restaurant.

"Then I shall meet you there," she said suddenly. "I'm not sure how long I will be and I don't like to make you wait in a club. Besides, I should like to see where you live. Is it nice?"

"I like it," Jair said. He thought



Jair tried to block out the horror that invaded his brain

briefly of his compact apartment, with its small collection of art, books and music spools. While it, too, would have been considered strange by fashionable galactic taste, it was the one place where Jair really felt comfortable. He had a feeling that she might like it.

Cybele stood up. Her eyes were on a level with his and there was a hint of desire in them as she looked at him. "Now run along and we will meet later."

Jair could feel the suppressed excitement which seemed to radiate from her and his heart beat a little faster. But he merely nodded and turned to the door. As he stepped into the corridor, he looked back, but Cybele Rilka had turned to her mirror and was lost in concentration.

HAVING stopped off at his office, then at a store to pick up the ingredients for a Denebian Whirlpool cocktail, it was an hour later when Jair arrived at his apartment. He absent-mindedly jabbed his thumb into the thumb-lock and swung the door open.

The stench of charred wood struck him in the face. It sent him reeling backward, tears coming to his stinging

eyes. He groped his way through the door, wincing when his hand touched the hot wall, and found a wall switch. There was a low hum as the blower was activated.

Within a few minutes the air had cleared and Jair could see. The apartment had been gutted by fire, so recently that wisps of smoke still curled up from the blackened skeleton of a chair.

Jair Holding's home, like every other of the age, was equipped with a device which was guaranteed to put out any fire almost as soon as it started and would at the same time sound a general alarm in the apartment house and in the nearest fire station. Yet it was obvious that not only had the fire burned unchecked, but that there had been no alarm of any sort.

He stepped through the charred ruins and went to the wall which held the automatic anti-fire switch. The blaze, he could see, had been so intense that even the walls were cracked in spots.

Using his handkerchief, for the metal was still hot, he swung open the small door to the switch. He peered inside and grunted with anger. There was a sharp, jagged break in the solenoid. The edges of the break were bright, for the fire had not penetrated past the door. Someone had deliberately broken the solenoid before setting fire to his belongings.

He glanced quickly around the apartment. The windows were still firmly locked on the inside, which meant that anyone entering had had to come in through the door. The implications were staggering. The only way that anyone could have gotten through the door was by forging Jair's right thumbprint. But it would have to have been a perfect forgery. The slightest variance in a whorl, the merest difference in the chemical composition of the skin oil, and the lock would have resisted. To the best of Jair's knowledge, there were no more than two or three criminals in the entire galaxy capable of such perfection.

It needed no thorough inspection to see that nothing had resisted the flames. Every possession was charred beyond recognition. Anger burned deeply within Jair as he turned and walked out of the apartment.

He stopped at the nearest visiphone booth, and the Central Directory soon supplied the home number of Fenning Benson. A moment later, the president of A.G.I. looked out of the screen.

"What's wrong?" he asked as soon as he caught sight of Jair's face.

"I'm coming over," Jair said grimly. "I want to settle all the details tonight. I'm going to take the first ship for Nike early in the morning. This matter has become personal."

"What's happened?" Benson asked again. "An attack on you?"

"How many know that I agreed to take the job?" Jair asked.

"Why, the members of A.G.I. They were still in session and I notified them as soon as I left you."

"Well, your leak has been busy," Jair said. "There was no attack on me, but somebody got into my apartment and burned it. The solenoid switch was broken and in some way the fire was chemically controlled so that it didn't spread beyond my apartment. I don't believe in accidents, Benson, so this must have been a warning to me to stay away from Nike."

IV

EARLY the next morning Jair Holding took an air-cab to the Nyork spaceport high above the streets in the central part of the city. He had spent several hours with Benson the night before, arranging details and making sure that his fee was sent through to the night deposit. Then he'd gone to a hotel and spent the night.

As he approached the spaceport, he began to face the possibility that he might have trouble getting on the ship. Benson had made the reservation the night before in his own name, but there

still might be trouble. There was only one space line operating between Nike and the other planets of the Federation and it was Nikean owned. There had been many attempts to establish a rival line, but Nike had always refused to grant a franchise.

He remembered something else that Benson had told him. It was believed that the Nikean ships were powered by some secret method, unknown to the other planets. There had been a number of attempts to discover the secret but all had failed. The Federation had passed a law that all non-Federation space ships had to carry at least ten crewmen who were natives of Federation planets. For years such quota crewmen were spies, but they had never been given any duties and had never learned anything. Benson had intimated that there would be a handsome bonus for Jair if he returned with the power secret as well as the other information.

The air-cab deposited him on one of the public vehicle ramps and Jair took a walkolator up to the main terminal.

Often as he'd been in the terminal of the spaceport, Jair Holding had never ceased to marvel at it. The main room was huge, covering an area of at least fifty square blocks. At one end were special waiting rooms for those travelers who required an atmosphere different from that of Terra. Covering the walls and the ceiling were three-dimensional murals depicting all the known cultures of the galaxy. At the north end of the room, overshadowing everything else, was the huge galactic board, with its multicolored lights giving information on every known star system in the galaxy. The board gave the distance from Terra, number of planets and their names, populations, type of life and planetary conditions as related to Terra.

About halfway down he found Regulus in green lights. Distance from Terra, seventy-seven light years. First planet in the system, Nike. Population, 10,722,643,126. Type of life, human. Planetary conditions, 1.00. Second planet in the system, Pax. The only other item on that line was one stating that the conditions of Pax were identical with Nike and Terra. As Jair started to turn away, he saw the Nike population change, but didn't stop to see how much of an increase had been made as he watched.

He had started across the terminal when he caught sight of a familiar face. It brought with it a memory that had been washed away by his anger the night before. He cursed with chagrin and guilt and swerved toward her.

CYBELE RILKA looked every bit as voluptuous in her bright blue traveling costume as she had in her scanty evening gown. She stood near one of the boarding gates, her maid with her. There were a number of others standing around too, but like the maid they vanished into a gray obscurity in the presence of the blonde. She looked up and smiled as she saw Jair.

"I should be crawling on my hands and knees," he said as he came up. "There are only two things that could make me forget a date with you, and one of them happened last night. Will you ever forgive me?"

"It isn't often that a man forgets a date with me," Cybele said in her sultry voice, "but I forgive you. It's true that I might not have normally, but this time I accept your excuse."

"But I haven't made it yet. . . ."

"Yes, you have—unconsciously, perhaps. When you left your apartment last night you left the door unlocked. I discovered this when there was no answer to my ring and a woman's curiosity made me look inside. I saw the fire, or rather the results of it. How did it ever happen?"

"I don't know," Jair said, shrugging. Then, for the first time, he realized the implication of her presence in the terminal: "Are you leaving Terra?"

She nodded. "Didn't I tell you? But of course not—we didn't have our date.

But that was another reason I'd decided to see you. Yesterday was my last day at *The Asteroid.* Tonight, I open in the *Gilded Constellation* in Niketa, the capital of Nike."

"You're going to Nike?" Jair said in astonishment. "But that's wonderful. I am too—or at least I think I am."

She laughed. "Don't you know if you're going?"

"I'm supposed to have a reservation," he explained, "which reminds me that I'd better go see about it. But reservation or no, I'll be on that ship when it blasts off. We'll make up for that broken date when we get to Nike."

"Perhaps," she called after him as he started away.

HE QUICKLY crossed the terminal to the Nike ticket office. The young Nikean behind the counter looked up as Jair approached. His face wore the expression of hostility which Jair knew was common to most of them.

"Yes?" There was no cordiality in his voice.

"I'm here to pick up a reservation for this morning," Jair said. "Made in the name of Fenning Benson. Code number two-four-B."

The man punched a key on the small machine in front of him and frowned at the results.

"There was such a reservation made," he admitted. "Are you Fenning Benson?"

"No." There was no point in claiming he was; they'd merely check with Central Identification. "But I'm connected with Mr. Benson and he made the reservation for me. I have an authorization here if you'd care to see it."

The Nikean was shaking his head. "We cannot deliver reservations to persons other than those who make them. There is a shortage of passenger space and this would not be fair to others."

"How long before blast off?" Jair asked, thinking he might still get Benson down to pick up the reservation.

"About twenty minutes, but we cannot hold the reservation any longer."

"All right," Jair said. "I'll take a seat on the next ship."

"Sorry, there are no seats available on the next flight."

"When is the first available reservation?"

The Nikean made a show of consulting his machine again. "There might be one in about seven months," he said finally.

"I don't believe it," Jair said. "I don't believe there are that many people going to your planet. Your trade agreements with the Federation states that you may not keep anyone from visiting Nike. I demand that you prove that the ship is completely booked."

"The agreement also states that we may refuse passage to anyone who is under the influence of drugs."

"But I'm not and I can prove it," Jair protested.

"It will take longer than twenty minutes to prove it," the Nikean said. He grinned humorlessly. "After that, I'll think up something else."

Jair knew a stalemate when he saw one. He was sure that there was a way of getting around it before departure time of the next ship, but he was determined to be on this one. Turning sharply on his heels and walking across the terminal, he went directly toward the exits until he was sure there was enough of a crowd to mask him; then he turned toward the side. He'd already thought of an alternative the night before and had made a point of learning the location of the gate for crewmen.

A NUMBER of the crew for the Nikean ship were already going through the gate as he arrived. He drifted back, out of sight of the guard, and waited until he saw a man he was sure was a Terran. He stopped him, wasting no time in preliminaries.

"I'll give you five thousand credits for your working papers," he said. The sale of working papers was perfectly

legal throughout the galaxy, with space on the papers for the transfer to be noted; but Jair was offering well over double what space ship crew papers were worth.

"Well, I kind of like the berth," the man said, eyeing Jair. It was obvious that his cupidity had been aroused by the amount of the offer. "And it ain't so easy to get another berth these days. A man ought to have at least ten thousand for giving up an easy job like this one."

"I'll give you seven thousand—if you'll take a bank order for two thousand of it."

"No bank orders. It's easier to write a bank order than it is to make it good, and you'd be on Nike where there ain't no Federation pols to arrest you."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do," Jair said. "Five thousand credits and another job."

"What kind of a job?"

"Anything you can do. I'll give you a note to Benson, the head of A.G.I. You know who he is."

"I know who he is all right," the man said, "but does he know who you are? I ain't buying no double-jet, mate."

"Look," Jair said hurriedly. He pulled his passport from his pocket and showed it. "This is an industrial passport, countersigned by the A.G.I. That proves that I work for them. Benson will be pretty grateful if you help me get on this ship. And you'll still have my five thousand credits." The passport did carry the seal that indicated the bearer worked for the Association of Galactic Industries. Jair had insisted on it the night before, when it was obvious that the opposition had already learned that he was on the A.G.I. payroll. Benson had gotten a Planet Department man out of bed at midnight to issue it.

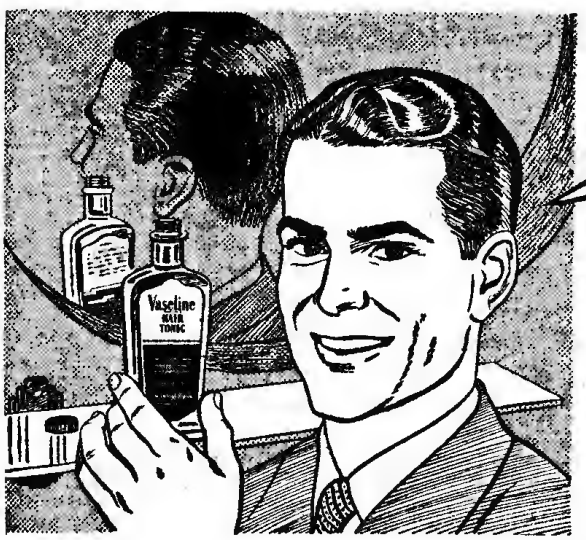
The passport swung the deal. The crewman signed his working papers

[*Turn page*]



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while Jair wrote the note, then passed them over in return for the note and the money.

Jair filled in his own name on the papers and went toward the gate. Even if the Nikeans learned what had happened, they wouldn't be able to stop him. In order to do so they'd have to hold up the ship while they made formal request for a substitute crewman. And while they were doing that, Benson could bring pressure to have the request denied.

The guard passed him with no more than a glance at the papers. Jair walked out across the landing field, behind some other crewmen, heading for the gleaming silver ship poised on the launching cradle.

As he strode along, he glanced over and saw that passengers were already boarding the ship. Among them he caught a glimpse of Cybele Rilka, followed by her maid.

He was halfway across the field when one of the men ahead of him glanced back—and froze in mid-stride. His mouth worked in soundless horror as he pointed over Jair's shoulder.

JAIR whirled to look, saw the huge bale of steel dropping upon him. Frantically he leaped to one side. It seemed that the bale of steel swerved with him. It loomed over him, blotting out the sun. There was no time to dodge again, no time to do anything but stand there, in a stasis of fear, feeling the crushing impact before it happened.

The five-ton-bale suddenly hesitated in mid-air, as though it had run into an invisible wall. He could almost feel the straining steel as it struggled against an unseen barrier. Then it dropped to the artificial ground, sending little spumes of dust over Jair's feet. It was so near he could have reached out and touched it.

The crewman drifted back. "That was a close one, it was," he said. "Wonder what went wrong?"

Jair followed his gaze across the field to where a Projectile-Crane had been loading steel into a freighter scheduled for Venus. Its squat barrel now pointed toward him while the figures of workmen scurried about it.

"Thought sure it had you, mate," the crewman went on. "Lucky it wasn't aimed a little higher. Funny how it fell, though . . . just like it hit something." He looked at Jair. "You're a new one. Bought your papers?"

"Yes," Jair said. He still needed all of his concentration to handle the weakness in his knees.

"Well, it's a soft berth," the crewman said. "The Nikeans don't let us do a thing . . . better get aboard now." He walked off.

Slowly Jair's awareness expanded, spreading out from the mass of steel denting the ground in front of him, and took in the rest of the field. He saw that the passengers had stopped to watch, and he was aware of Cybele Rilka and her maid as though he were seeing them through a telescope.

Time was still stopped for Jair Holding, as if all movement had been arrested at the moment the bale dropped. In this vacuum of action, he had the fleeting impression that in some way the miracle that had saved him had come from the blonde. Then it was gone, the passengers were moving again, and he was released from the vacuous thrall.

He shrugged, knowing that the impression had been foolish, and went toward the gleaming space ship.

The Nikean First Officer glanced briefly at his papers. "You were lucky," he said sourly.

Jair wasn't sure if he referred to the near-accident or to the fact that he'd gotten through the gate. "You mean because it missed me?" he asked.

"It wouldn't have missed you," the First Officer said, "if you hadn't been standing where you were."

"What did the location have to do with it?"

"You were standing beside a magnetic mooring post. Its field caught the bale

just before it reached you."

Such a possibility hadn't occurred to Jair, but since he knew that magnetic posts were sometimes used, it was logical. He was badly in need of some logic to explain what had looked like a miracle. He didn't believe in miracles. Magnetic posts were more acceptable.

"I suppose," he said, "that the magnetic post was also responsible for the Projectile-Crane bearing on me?"

The First Officer glanced toward the Crane, once more prosaically loading the freighter. "A product of Terra," he said contemptuously. "If it had been manufactured on Nike, nothing would have gone wrong."

"Or," Jair said deliberately, "it might have been because the Crane is manned either by a Nikean or a Terran with a liking for Nikean money."

The First Officer looked at him with bright hostility. "That is also possible," he said. He waved Jair into the ship.

V

JAIR found himself in a large room which he knew was well in the nose of the craft. At the far end was an elaborate instrument panel, with four Nikean officers strapped into cushioned chairs before it. The rest of the room was given over to launching nets for the crew. To one side was a doorway which apparently led to quarters for the crew, although quarters were not needed on such short trips. He could see no way into the engine room.

"Strap yourself in," ordered a Nikean officer as Jair appeared.

Jair looked around and then picked a net next to the Terran who had spoken to him after the accident. The latter looked up as he climbed into the net and recognized him.

"Closest thing I ever saw," he said, shaking his head. "I sure thought your jets were burned out. Don't know how it missed you."

"The officer," Jair said, nodding toward the entrance, "said I was standing by a magnetic mooring post. That sound right to you?"

"Could be, mate—but why was it turned on? Guess you can be glad somebody was careless . . . you mean his nibs told you that? Usually they don't bother to even give us the right weather report."

"I don't think I've ever met a Nikean until today," Jair said. "Do they all look as if somebody had just put a hot rocket to the seat of their pants?"

"That they do, mate. There ain't a Nikean who wouldn't cheat his mother out of her space helmet and then send her out to weld a flight plate."

Jair laughed. "What do we do once we take off?"

"Nothing. We never do anything but strap ouselves in our nets, then unstrap ourselves and play Castorian rummy until it's time to strap in again. That's what makes these Nikean ships the softest berths in space—if you don't mind being treated as if you were just about to try lifting the paint off their precious ship."

Jair looked around the room. "How do you get into the engine room if something goes wrong?"

"You don't, mate. These ships all have sealed engine rooms and nothing ever goes wrong with them. That's what they say and there ain't anybody can prove any different."

They'd been talking low enough, but one of the officers looked around and scowled in their direction.

"Put a seal on your lips, you Terrans," he ordered.

It was only a few more minutes before the take off. The First Officer clanged the outer door shut, came into the room and closed the air-lock door. He nodded to the other officers and they all waited until a green light flashed in the ceiling. Then the ship took off with a smooth surge of power that flung the men deep into their nets.

Any take-off was rough, but it seemed to Jair that the Nikean ship made it better than any he'd experienced before.

ONCE they were past Terra's atmosphere, the ship's surge smoothed out as they went into overdrive. The only sense of movement came from the slight vibration of the gravity motors.

Men quickly tumbled from their nets. The Terrans got out cards and prepared to play Castorian rummy. Jair noticed that there was no attempt to include the Nikeans. They in turn were bunched together across the room and seemed on the point of starting a game which involved the use of a large, multicolored and many-sided die. It was something Jair had never seen before, and he was trying to figure out what sort of game it was when the First Officer came over to him. Jair looked up and was once more aware of the hostility which the officer made no attempt to disguise. It was mixed with something else, which he thought was suspicion. He wondered if the officer knew who he was—if the leak had flooded in every direction. He didn't have to wait long to find out.

"You Terrans are persistent, aren't you?" the First Officer asked. He didn't sound as if it were a quality which he admired.

"Usually," Jair said with a grin. "Were you referring to any special application, or merely giving me a grounding in Nikean philosophy?"

"I was referring to your insistence on going to Nike when it must be obvious that you're not wanted. Your failure to get a reservation should have made it clear enough."

"Oh, you know about that?"

"Naturally. The ticket office thought you might try something and notified all personnel. The guard at the crew gate notified us."

"Why didn't you stop me then?"

"For the reasons you anticipated, I'm sure. It would have delayed our takeoff and you might have succeeded anyway. Perhaps it's better this way."

"Or would have been," Jair said, "if your little trick with the Projectile-Crane hadn't fallen on its face, as it were?"

The First Officer looked at him with suspicion. "Why do you want to go to our planet?" he asked.

"Just so I may bask in the love and admiration you hold for Terra," Jair said. He grinned at the Nikean.

"All right, Terran. Go on back to the passenger quarters."

"Why?"

"Since you're on the ship," the officer said, "you might as well ride there. Then we can put the reservation through for collection. And we'll save the expense of one crewman, since it is not our fault that we are one Terran short."

"You don't miss a thing, do you?" Jair said. He stood up. "A credit here, a credit there; I suppose it all mounts up. Let's go."

He followed the officer through a long corridor leading toward the rear of the ship. The officer stopped when they reached the door to the luxurious passenger salon. He motioned him in and went back the way he'd come.

AS JAIR had guessed, the ship was carrying no more than a half-capacity load. Most of the passengers were Nikeans—he could recognize most of them at a glance by this time—although there were a few who seemed to be Terrans. And, of course, there was Cybele Rilka.

He located her after a moment. She was seated near the middle, occupying a double-seat by herself while her maid sat behind her.

He strolled down the aisle until he reached her. She was leaning back in her seat with her eyes closed, a smile on her face. He stood looking at her for a moment, thinking that her beauty was almost frightening. Suddenly aware that the maid was looking at him, something akin to amusement in her face, he felt an abreaction of adolescent gauchery, and with it resentment of her.

"Hello," he said to the blonde. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Hello," she answered without opening her eyes. "I was wondering what was keeping you."

"You don't seem surprised to see me," he said, dropping into the seat across from her.

She opened her eyes lazily and stared at him. "Why should I be? You told me you'd be on the ship and I have reason to know that you are a very persistent young man." There was laughter in her eyes. "I must also admit that I saw you walking across the landing field." Her expression grew serious. "And that horrible accident. How did you manage to escape?"

Jair told her what the First Officer had said.

"But how lucky," she exclaimed. "Poor Jair—you've been having your share of ill fortune. Your fire last night and a near accident today."

"I do seem to be singled out," Jair said dryly. Then he went on before she could question his tone: "But it's been more than balanced by meeting you last night—and today finding that you are also going to Nike. What better luck could I ask?"

She thanked him with her eyes, then frowned. "But the fire happened right after you met me and the accident right after you learned I was going to Nike. Someone might think that it was I who brought you your bad luck."

"Did you, Cybele?" Jair asked quietly. He was blinded by her beauty, but not so blinded that the possibility hadn't already occurred to him. But on the other hand there was the feeling—foolish or not—that she had in some way helped him earlier.

"Do you think I would?" she countered. "Do you think I'm a dangerous woman, Jair?"

"You could be," he said seriously. "In the meantime, I've decided there's only one way to find out—that's to stay near you."

"Personal Observation?" she asked lightly.

"After all, I am a POB—and I can't think of any nicer work than observing you."

"No?"

"Well, let's not limit it to observation," Jair said.

THE GAME, and they both recognized it as such, was continued for a moment with their eyes. Then Cybele's expression became serious again.

"But what were you doing out on the landing field?" she asked. "Passengers aren't allowed there, are they?"

"No," Jair said. He explained the matter of the reservation and the method he'd used to get on the ship.

"How frightfully clever of you," she said. "Why do they want to keep you away from Nike? Are you going there on business—or shouldn't I ask?"

"I don't mind," he said truthfully. He was certain that there had been a leak in the offices of the A.G.I., and that everyone who had reason to want to know why he was going to Nike now knew. He had never much believed in secrecy anyway, going on the assumption that if people knew he was investigating them they would make more mistakes. "I've been hired by the Association of Galactic Industries to make a survey for them in the Regulus system."

"The Regulus system?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I want to go to Pax as well as Nike."

"But why? Is it only because Pax is such a mysterious planet?"

"I have a normal amount of curiosity about a planet upon which no one from the outside has ever stepped," Jair admitted, "but my real reason is that I may find what I'm loking for on Pax."

He had a strange feeling that she was agreeing with him, but at the same time she was shaking her head.

"Whatever it is, I doubt if you'll find it there," she said. "You know, Jair, it seems to me that there is one very simple explanation of Pax which has never occurred to anyone—perhaps just because it's simple. I don't know that this is the true explanation, but it's

often seemed to me it might be."

"What is it?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that the reason no one from Pax has ever visited other worlds, and that no one has been permitted to visit them, is that the people there are just like the ones on Nike only more backward—misfits—"

"You mean," Jair asked, "that Pax might be a dumping ground for Nike's morons, insane, and others who are unable to adapt to the civilized galaxy?"

"Something like that, yes."

There was something within him that emotionally rejected this—like a separate part of himself saying that it couldn't be—even though his mind told him that it was logical.

"Maybe," he said reluctantly. "Have you been to Nike before, Cybele?"

"Oh, yes. They have always booked a number of Terran entertainers. They don't go for many of the acts from other planets, but I suppose they accept Terran entertainers because we belong to the same race."

"Tell me something about them," he said. "I don't think I've ever seen a Nikean, at least not to recognize him as such, before today. I know that they are pretty cordially disliked through the galaxy and that they seem to return this dislike. Do you get along well with them?"

SHE SHRUGGED. "I neither like nor dislike them, if that's what you mean. I think there's a good reason for the mutual hostility that does exist."

"What is it?"

"Differences," she said. "There was a time when—we Terrans looked with prejudice upon anyone who was even slightly different from us. Then, as our boundaries expanded throughout the galaxy, we began to accept many differences. To some degree, this was also true of races on other planets. But practically all cultures—at least those which attained any great influence—involved a certain amount of trust. While many times this was temporary, or was a trust in a fellow creature to help you destroy another fellow creature, still it was a sort of mutual trust. That's why the Nikean culture seems utterly alien to everyone else in the galaxy."

"You mean it lacks trust?"

She nodded. "I believe I'm right in saying that Nike is the only culture built upon mutual distrust which has managed to keep pace with all other cultures. There have been such cultures before, but they never advanced much beyond the primitive level."

"You mean the hostility I noticed also exists between individual Nikeans?"

"Yes. Their entire culture is based on mutual hostility and suspicion. For example, I am told that when there is a theft on Nike, if any legal action is taken it will be against the man from whom the theft has been made. While a definition of crime will vary throughout the galaxy, almost anything which is considered a crime elsewhere will be accepted as normal on Nike."

She laughed. "Sometimes," she said, "I forget that it is the eternal rule that a woman of beauty should never display too much intelligence. You find this a flaw in me?"

"Not at all," Jair said. "In fact—"

He broke off, aware that one of the Nikean stewards had come up and was standing beside their seat. He looked up.

"Jair Holding?" the steward asked.

"Yes."

"There is a visicall for you from Terra."

"Thank you," Jair said. "Where can I take it?"

"There is a private booth in the lounge of the men's room," the steward said, gesturing toward the rear of the salon.

"I'll be right back, Cybele," Jair said. He nodded to the steward and strode off.

HE HAD never been troubled with space sickness, and had been feeling fine all morning. But, suddenly, a wave of dizziness struck him and the walls seemed to tilt. There was a sharp pain in his head—and then it was gone as

the walls righted themselves. But he felt under strain and he hurried, wanting cold water on his temples and a wall to lean against.

He had thought the men's room was on the right of the corridor, but he saw suddenly that it was on the left. He headed for it, aware that he was walking uncertainly. Reaching it, he started to push the door open, but even that much effort seemed like a futile struggle. He could almost feel his muscles working against each other. The pain in his head was returning. Then, just as he felt the door start to give, the dizziness swept over him once more. This time he was almost blinded, and just back of his eyes there was a tremendous pressure. Dimly, he could see the walls swaying.

As suddenly as they had come, the dizziness and pain were gone. He could see with a new clarity. And as his eyes focused on the door which he had half open, Holding felt a sudden surge of blind panic.

The sign above the door said: *Emergency Escape Hatch.*

For a full minute, he stood there with one foot still poised through the doorway. He could see the polished metal of the chute which dropped away to the emergency air-lock. One more step and he would have shot along the smooth surface, hesitated a second in the air-lock, and then would have catapulted out into space.

He drew his foot back, as though it were a separate thing which he controlled temporarily, and set it down on the firm floor. He slammed the door shut.

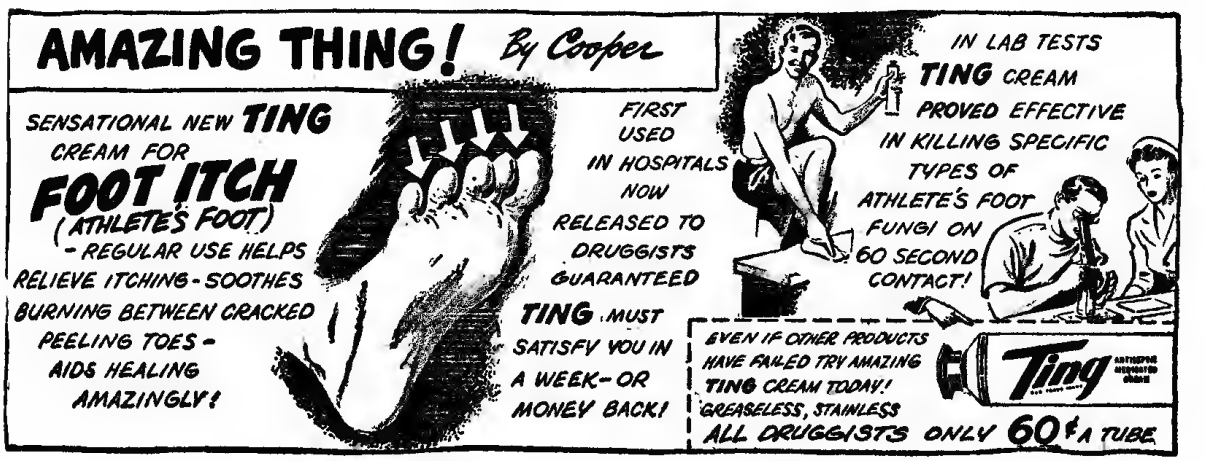
The men's room was across the corridor where he had first thought it to be. He forced his legs to carry him across and into the lounge. Then he sat down to wait for the trembling to leave his knees.

HE LOOKED at the visiphone booth, but made no move to enter it. He knew there was no call for him, that it had been only a means of getting him to walk to the end of the aisle. If he had gone through the escape hatch, it would have been no accident. Not that he thought that the fire or the wild Projectile-Crane had been accidents either; but this was a clearer case of an attempt to murder him. He had looked at the sign above the door and it had read "Men's Room." He was not in the habit of reading restroom signs so carelessly.

It seemed, as he sat thinking, that there was only one explanation—an explanation which had already occurred to him the night before, when Benson had explained what he would be up against. Unless the Nikeans had a secret weapon—and that sounded too much like something out of a visiscreen thriller—it was the only thing which logically accounted for what they were suspected of doing.

Hypnotism simply had to be the answer. It was a fact that hypnotism had

[*Turn page*]



never been practiced on such a large scale, but there was no reason the Nikeans couldn't have learned more about it than Federation scientists. And it was the only solution which fitted all known facts about special abilities which might be possessed by any race.

It would explain his illusion about the sign. Except—what had made it lose its hold just as he was about to step through the emergency door? He wondered if he possessed some basic resistance, or will to live, that could balk a hypnotic compulsion. It had to be something like that—or outside help. He remembered the impression he'd had at the spaceport that help had come from Cybele Rilka . . . it was not impossible that this time she might have noticed whoever had put him under hypnotic influence and had done something to break it. But that would imply that someone else was interested in the sabotage throughout the galaxy. But who? And why?

There were many things he wanted to know about the blonde entertainer. After a time, he drank some cold water, verified the belief that there was no call on the visiphone, and went back to his seat.

"Was there something wrong?" Cybele asked anxiously as he sat down. "You looked peculiar there in the corridor, as though you were ill or uncertain."

"A slight dizzy spell," he answered, "but it passed. It was probably no more than the result of adjusting my sight to normal objects after gazing at you so long."

She smiled. "And your phone call? Was it important?"

"In a manner of speaking, it was," he said with a smile. He leaned back against the seat as two Nikean officers came into the salon. It seemed to Jair that they looked angrier than usual, as if they knew of his near-accident and escape.

They came along the corridor, looking suspiciously into each seat. One of them paused beside Jair and it seemed to him that there was heightened suspicion on the officer's face as he looked at the blonde. But he passed on without speaking.

"I wonder what they were doing?" Cybele said when they were gone.

"Probably looking for a misplaced ambition," Jair said lightly. "By the way, do you suppose we might make up that lost date tonight? I promise not to be sidetracked by any fires."

"I don't see why not," she said. "I'll be working late at the club, but after that we might have supper. Are you sure that you feel up to it—that you're not ill?"

"I never felt more up to anything," Jair said truthfully. "It's a date."

After that, he leaned against the seat and went to sleep.

VI

THE ship came down on the spaceport above the city of Niketa. When she was secure in her cradle, lights flashed above each seat and the passengers filed toward the air-lock. Jair Holding walked beside Cybele, the maid trailing behind them.

"Caristia will be looking after my luggage," Cybele said. "Would you like her to take care of yours too?"

"Unfortunately," Jair said, "my luggage was left behind when I had to improvise a method of getting on the ship. I'll have to outfit myself here . . . where are you staying, Cybele?"

"The Nikean Palace. It's the best hotel in the city, if you can get a reservation."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Jair. "If I have the same trouble here with reservations, I may be sleeping in the park."

She laughed. "If rumors are right, they'll probably let you into the Nikean Palace. It is said that a guest at the Palace can't take a deep breath without being reported to either the Thought Police or the Security Police."

"Well," Jair said dryly, "they might be able to arrest me for the thoughts

I have about you. . . ."

She laughed again, looking at him from beneath her long lashes.

A Nikean officer and a customs official waited at the bottom of the ramp. Cybele was quickly through, but they seemed to linger interminably over Jair's papers. The blonde waved to him and then entered a waiting air-cab.

When the officials had finished with him, Jair turned and took his first look at the city of Niketa, spreading out below the spaceport. Not as large as Nyork, Niketa was still one of the major cities of the galaxy. The buildings seemed completely modern. Then his eye was caught by one nearby building, rearing several stories above the level of the spaceport, and he realized there was a difference.

Built of gleaming white stone, its architecture was conventional, in that each story was progressively smaller in area so that every floor had its own terrace; but there the similarity ended. Each terrace was topped by great jagged peaks and razor-sharp scallops, presenting a sort of barbaric beauty. The sides of the building, instead of being smooth, consisted of sharp projections of stone and sudden overhanging crags with what looked like knives set into the edges.

Something that Cybele had said came back to Jair and it explained the building. A people whose society was built upon a basis of mutual distrust would have built their homes, originally, with every possible protection against intruders. This sense of arming each building, modified and made more beautiful, would naturally still be expressed in their architecture.

He lifted his gaze above the city and saw, for the first time, the great verdant planet hanging just above the Nikean horizon. He knew it must be Pax. It was close—so near that he could see the markings of her mountains—and looked like a great emerald hung in the sky. Farther up he could see the dark moon, Losna, outlined in the bright light that radiated from Regulus.

He turned to leave and bumped into someone. Drawing back, he saw a short, heavy-set man who was regarding him with the usual Nikean expression of distrust. Except for his expression, he might have been any disgruntled citizen of Terra. His clothes were of a sombre shade and everything about him gave the impression that he would become invisible the moment he was in a crowd of four or more persons.

"I beg your pardon," Jair said politely. He stepped around the man and headed toward the air-cabs. To his surprise, he heard the man following closely behind him.

HE STOPPED. The man stopped. Jair turned around in annoyance and stared at him. The Nikean returned the stare without changing expression.

"Am I in your way?" Jair asked coldly.

"No."

"Then what do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Are you following me?" Jair asked, a sudden suspicion forming in his mind.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I," said the man glumly, "have been appointed to act as your guide during your visit to Nike. My name is Alecto Numa."

"What if I don't want a guide?" Jair demanded.

"In that event, I am still your guide. You should be honored. It is not every common Terran who gets the attention of a guide on Nike."

Jair glared at the little man for a few seconds, then laughed. "Guide, is it?" he said. "What did you say your name is?"

"Alecto Numa."

"Then tell me, Alecto. Isn't it possible that you are more than a guide?"

"Every man is more than he appears to be," the Nikean said.

"A sound philosophy," Jair agreed. "But I had something specific in mind.

The thought had occurred to me that you might be from the police. Are you?"

Alecto Numa regarded him balefully. "I am," he said with pride. "Alecto Numa, Officer First Class, Nike Security Police."

"How do you do," Jair said formally. "Jair Holding, Citizen First Class and Terran Suspect. At your service—up to a point."

There was no indication that the Nikean policeman shared Jair's viewpoint of the situation. He continued to stare at Jair as if he'd just caught him in the midst of a murder.

"All right," Jair said in defeat. "Is there any way of getting rid of you?"

Alecto Numa nodded. "By going back to Terra," he said.

"In that case," Jair said, "you might as well come along with me. We can ride in the same cab and you can save your expense money for your old age."

For a brief second there was almost a look of pleasure on the Nikean policeman's face as he fell into step with Jair.

They climbed into the nearest air-cab and Jair gave the name of the Palace Hotel. The cab shot away from the spaceport with a quick jetting that slammed them both against the back of the seat.

"Alecto," Jair said when he could get his breath, "why do you hate we Terrans so much?"

"Because you are decadent people," Alecto growled.

"It's a thought which has often occurred to me," Jair admitted, "but your bringing it up is a little like Regulus calling Vega hot. . . . Since we got off to such a friendly start, Alecto, let me ask you one more thing. Do you know why I'm here?"

"Yes."

"You know," Jair said, "I think I'll call you Honest Alecto after this. I never thought you'd admit it."

"Nikeans do not lie."*

*This, of course, was true. In most cases, Nikeans far outstripped the rest of the galaxies in vices; but they couldn't lie. There were individuals who had gone through extensive training and so had learned to lie, but they were few in number.

"Well, we'll let that pass for the moment. Does your job on the Security Police pay you much of a salary?"

"The salary is very small," Alecto admitted, "but then there is the matter of bribery which in some years is good."

"Honest Alecto," Jair murmured. "Spoken like the man I hoped you were. Now, since you know the reason I'm here, why not help me to accomplish my mission quickly? Then you may have your wish about my going back to Terra—and be some ten thousand credits richer yourself."

"No."

"Fifteen thousand credits."

"No."

"What is your price then?" Jair asked.

"I have no price."

"But you admitted that you take bribery. Why not this one?"

THE little man shook his head stubbornly. "You do not understand. If you should like to bribe me to further a scheme of your own against some other individual, I would accept with thanks. Such would be an honorable bribe. But you wish to bribe me to help not you, but the Association of Galactic Industries, against the people of Nike. This is not honorable and is punishable by something worse than death. If you were here only as an individual I could do anything with you or against you that I liked. But you are here as an enemy of my state and I must do only that upon which we are all agreed."

"It's a bit confusing," Jair said.

"That is because you Terrans are an immoral people. You would think nothing of destroying the whole planet of Nike, but when you meet me as an individual you desire to give me money, even to have me ride in this cab with you. You are degenerate."

Jair gave up and looked out the window, watching the city that spread out beneath them. In a few minutes they arrived at the hotel.

It proved to be all that Cybele had

said it was, rivaling even the best Terran hotels in luxury. The Nikean bellboy who took Jair to his room carefully explained how to operate the various energy switches which would project deadly beams across the doorway and windows. Jair thanked him, noting to himself that at least burglars must lead a tough life on Nike.

Alecto Numa had followed them as far as the corridor outside the room. There he had stopped. When the bellboy was gone, Jair invited him to come inside and make himself comfortable, but the little policeman refused.

After a quick shower and a few minutes under the rays of an energy lamp, Jair went downstairs, the detective again tagging along. He found a public visiphone booth and dialed the interplanetary operator. When she came on, he gave her the number of Fenning Benson on Terra.

There was a short wait and then Benson appeared on the screen.

"Got something already, Holding?" he asked as soon as he recognized his caller.

JAIR shook his head. "All I've gotten so far," he said, "is about the most universal brush-off I ever experienced. I've learned one thing, which if true, may be useful—if I can figure out how to take advantage of it. I don't want to say too much—the visiphone is probably tapped. I called to see if you'd learned anything about the fire in my apartment."

"Nothing that helps," Benson said. "According to the Galactic Police, there are only two individuals in the galaxy capable of forging a thumb print well enough to fool the sort of lock you had. One is a Terran, named Wil Nevers, and the other is a Rigelian, named Dzanku Dzanku. Neither one has been within fifty light years of Terra during the past week. My guess is that it was done by a Nikean criminal and, of course, we'd have no record of him."

"One more thing, Benson. What about that leak in your organization?"

"I checked again today and found nothing. Whoever's doing it must have some special training, for everyone passed the Korbyll Emotional Index machine."

"Well, keep after it," Jair said. "Not that it'll help now. They've even put a policeman on me. But you might need the information some other time."

He broke the connection and stepped out of the booth. Then, with Alecto Numa trailing behind, he went out and soon found a men's clothing store. The Nikean policeman patiently lurked without while he went into one of the fitting rooms.

When he'd purchased the clothes, and arranged for them to be sent directly to the hotel, he took a thousand-credit note from his pocket and waited until the clerk was looking at it.

"Is there a back way out of this fitting room?" he asked.

The clerk nodded.

"Do you think," Jair asked, holding the note out, "that this would alleviate your dislike of Terrans enough for you to show me the back entrance and then stay in this room for another five minutes?"

The clerk's answer was to reach out and take the note. He put it in his pocket and led the way to a door. He opened it and pointed down the long corridor.

"That door leads directly to the street," he said.

"Just like it was made to order," Jair said. "You must do an interesting business here."

"There are times," the clerk said gravely, "when a gentleman may wish to get away from his wife for an hour or two. He comes in for a fitting, goes out through there and then returns the same way."

"Bless the Nikean mating habits," Jair murmured. He hurried down the long corridor and out on the street. An air-cab swooped down in answer to his hail. The driver listened to his instruc-

tions, glanced at the money he was holding out, and nodded.

The air-cab stayed low, darting between buildings and whirling around corners. Jair watched through the rear window, but saw no other cabs about. He nodded with satisfaction, but was still determined to make sure.

The air-cab dropped suddenly and came to stop in front of a large building. Jair leaped to the sidewalk and walked hurriedly through the building and out on the next street. He hailed another air-cab and once more gave instructions.

They sped over the city and after a time came down in a more squalid section. The cab settled in front of a building bearing a large cosmeon sign which flashed out the name of *The Nikean Lair.*

"That's the place," the driver said.

Jair climbed out of the cab and paid the driver. He turned to go into the bar, only to find his way blocked by Alecto Numa.

For a minute he stared at the expressionless face of the Nikean, feeling his own anger and frustration, then the humor of the situation struck him and he laughed.

"You win, Alecto," he said. "You're the first shadow I ever failed to shake, so you must be good. Let's go back to the hotel. I give up." He had mental reservations about this, but didn't voice them.

The Nikean nodded stolidly and followed him into the air-cab he hailed.

VII

BACK at the hotel, Jair rested for a while and then changed clothes. When he left the room, Alecto Numa was waiting patiently.

"Don't you ever get a relief?" Jair asked as they started down the stairs.

"When I need it," Alecto said, shrugging.

"Well, we're going to the *Gilded Constellation,*" Jair said, "and I'll be there long enough so that you can at least eat."

Outside, they hailed an air-cab and Jair gave the driver the name of the club.

The *Gilded Constellation* turned out to be a bigger production than he had expected. Part of it was a large supper club, where Cybele Rilka was performing. The rest of it, almost a block square, was a gambling room.

Cybele was about to go on when he arrived.

"You'll get tired of watching the same act," she said. "Why don't you go over and wait near the dressing rooms on the other side of the gambling room? Caristia will be waiting for me there. Or try the gambling if you like."

"A man never has room for two vices," Jair said, "and mine just now is a blonde named Cybele. How come Caristia isn't working in the act tonight?"

"I never do the table work here," she said. "They don't like it, so I only work a single from the floor. Run along, darling."

So Jair ran along. After a long look of suspicion, Alecto Numa went to the bar to get something to eat while Jair rambled through the gambling room.

He had never been particularly interested in gambling, and he paid little attention to the games at first. Then he realized that most of them were totally unfamiliar. His impression was that almost every game here was operated by an electronic device, and he noticed there seemed to be an unusually large number of games meant to be operated by only one player.

He stopped once when he saw the game that the Nikeans on the ship had been starting to play just before he went to the passenger salon. There were seven men gathered across a large board from a house man. In the center of the board was a large eight-sided plastic, each side a different color. There was considerable money in front of each player.

The house man called out something

and the plastic figure began to move, jerking erratically first one way and then another. Sometimes it leaped briefly into the air. A dozen times it came to a stop with one color or another uppermost, only to convulsively leap into action again. Finally, after teetering on one edge for almost a full minute, it settled down with a solid thump and stayed there until a light went on inside the figure. The color black was on top and the houseman raked in the money.

JAIR had almost reached the far side of the room when he spotted Caristia. She stood in a wide doorway, wearing her usual shapeless and concealing gown, watching the gamblers. She seemed to be amused. As though aware that he was watching her, she looked around. Jair smiled and turned to watch a game nearby.

There were two medium-sized, glassed cages, one above the other. In the upper cage were two small plastic balls, one of them scarlet and the other white. The only connection between the upper and lower cages was a tube, its entrance a hole about half way up the side of the top cage. The hole was no larger than one of the two balls. The tube descended outside the cages, entering the lower one at a point along the side.

A Nikean stopped in front of the game and put down some money. Almost immediately the two balls within the cage lifted into the air and began circling each other in graceful swoops.

Jair guessed the object of the game was to reach the lower cage and whichever ball did so won. He knew very little about energy games, which he assumed this was, and he wondered if they could be fixed.

The two balls battled each other back and forth across the cage. Time and again, one of them would almost reach the exit only to be batted away by the other which in turn would try to reach the exit. The balls darted at each other so swiftly that it was almost impossible to follow them.

Despite the apparent equality, Jair soon noticed that the white ball always had a slight advantage. Finally, it batted the scarlet ball all the way across the cage and then darted through the exit. The house man pulled in the money and his customer stalked away, looking disgruntled.

After a moment of hesitation, Jair decided to try the game. There was no one else playing it and he was still curious. He walked up to the house man.

"What are the bets?" he asked.

It seemed to Jair that the house man looked at him with an unusual amount of pleasure. It was obvious that even more than just winning, they liked winning from a Terran, and the house man's expression convinced Jair that the game was rigged.

He was determined to watch it a bit more.

"Any amount you'd like to bet," the house man said. He pressed a lever and the white ball popped back into the top cage.

"Twenty-five credits," Jair said, putting the money down on the spot provided.

The house man nodded and turned to the machine. "The scarlet ball is yours," he said. "The white one belongs to the house."

Slowly and gracefully, the white ball rose in the air and circled aimlessly around the cage. The scarlet ball still rested on the bottom.

"There must be something wrong," Jair said. "One ball isn't moving."

"There's nothing wrong," the house man said. "Nikean machinery never breaks down. Perhaps the ball merely doesn't like your personality."

Jair had just decided that it was going to be a barefaced robbery when suddenly the scarlet ball leaped straight into the air and was through the hole in the wall before either of them was more than aware it was moving.

The house man glared angrily at him.

"Your Nikean machinery," Jair said dryly, "never breaks down, so the house obviously owes me money."

"Just a minute," the house man said, his voice strained with rage. He looked around the room, and a moment later an older man strolled over. "He," the house man said, pointing at Jair, "just won on my game."

The older man too glared at Jair.

"Look," Jair said, "I know you don't like Terrans, and fun is fun, but it's hardly my fault if your method for making this game crooked suddenly blew its jets. Pay me what I won and go glare at your mechanic."

The older man glanced around the room as though to call on everyone to witness what a difficult fellow Jair was being, then turned back to the house man.

"Pay him," he said.

The house man counted out twenty-five credits and shoved them roughly toward Jair. Then he and the older man both went back to glaring at him.

"Play it again," the older man said.

"I don't think I care to," Jair said lightly. "The one experience was quite entertaining, thank you."

"Play it."

"Wouldn't think of it. I only played it once to see if it was crooked. You've thoroughly convinced me that it is—or at least that it's meant to be—and so I have no more interest in it, or any other game."

There was more speechless staring, which Jair was beginning to associate with Nikeans, and he could almost feel the men's thoughts beating against him. But suddenly this was interrupted.

A single high note sounded once throughout the gambling room. Then a voice spoke from a loudspeaker. "This is a raid," it said, "by the Nikean Thought Police. Everyone stand where he is."

A half dozen men, in bright silver uniforms, came in. They spread out and advanced across the room, moving fast but apparently giving attention to everyone in the place. Two of them came directly, while the other four circled around behind and completed the hurried inspection of the room. Jair saw one of them try to slip an arm around Caristia, saw her shrug it off. He turned his attention back to the two officers who were before him.

Apparently the older man had already explained something, for one of the officers looked at him. "This the Terran?" he asked.

This was the first indication Jair had that the raid concerned him. He was surpised, but then he realized that the gambling club must have a direct alarm wire that called the police. But why the Thought Police? There was hardly anything subversive in beating a crooked gambling game, although they might be determined to call anything he did subversive.

"That's him," the house man said.

"Name, Terran?" the officer said.

"Jair Holding."

"Business on Nike?"

"You mean you don't know?" Jair said with a grin. "Oh, well, if you want to be formal, I'm a POB."

THE OFFICER nodded and pointed to the gambling game. "Play the game again."

"No," Jair said. He was beginning to get angry, even though he was puzzled at the insistence that he play the game again. Surely they could check on their equipment without involving him.

"That was an order," barked the officer. "You may bet as little as you like, but you must gamble once more."

"I refuse," Jair said grimly. "I'm getting a little tired of this. You are all quite within your rights in disliking Terrans as much as you please, but I am also within my rights in refusing to play a game when I have no desire to do so. You're overstepping your jurisdiction, officer."

"Perhaps," the officer said coldly. Another uniformed man stepped up be-

side him, carrying some sort of portable machine. The face of the machine was covered with dials and there were electrodes dangling from it. The officer gestured toward it. "We wish to test you, Terran. Do you consent to this?"

"What if I don't?"

The officer shrugged. "We will take you to headquarters and test you there. Our treaty with the Federation states that under the regulation governing planetary security we may hold any non-citizen for twenty-four hours without making a formal charge."

"What does a gambling game have to do with planetary security?" Jair wanted to know.

The officer stared at him without answering.

Jair looked at the machine. He guessed it was some sort of lie-detector. There was no practical objection to its being used on him; his only objection was concerned with the attitude of the police. But he decided that it was better to have one of his rights trampled than to lose twenty-four hours of freedom.

"All right," he said curtly. "Go ahead."

The electrodes were quickly fitted to his head. There was a slight hum of power from the machine as it was turned on.

"How did you win on the game?" the officer asked.

"I told you," Jair said. "Something must have gone wrong with the electronic circuit that controls the game."

"What are you doing on Nike?"

In view of the fact that everyone seemed to know why he was there, he saw no reason for being coy about it. "I'm here to carry out an investigation for the Association of Galactic Industries."

"Who is assisting you in your investigation?"

"No one," Jair said.

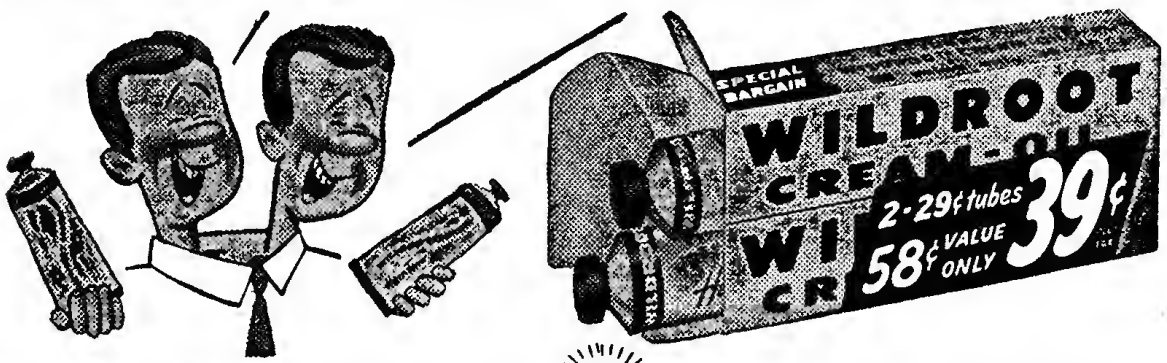
The two officers exchanged glances.

[*Turn page*]

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The electrodes were removed and with the removal the officer seemed to lose all interest in Jair. He stared thoughtfully at the man who had been running the gambling game and the latter paled under the glance.

A moment later, the uniformed men marched stiffly from the room, taking the gambler with them.

VIII

AFTER THE police left, Jair walked back toward the entrance to the gambling room. He caught a glimpse of Alecto Numa seated at the bar as he went on into the dinner room. He took a table and watched the rest of Cybele's act. When she'd finished, she came over and sat down.

"You finished gambling so soon?" she asked.

"I've already had my share of thrills," Jair admitted. He told her what had happened in the gambling room. He ended with his theory of why it had happened.

She was amused. "You're probably right," she said. "I told you that Nikeans are always suspicious of everyone and of each other. They probably arrested the poor house man because he permitted you to win."

"I suppose so," Jair said. He felt anger stir within him. "These are the damnedest people. "I wouldn't mind their hostility—after all, there are many races in the galaxy who dislike Terrans, and many of them with good cause. But I keep getting the feeling that everybody on this damned planet is laughing at me."

"Careful," Cybele said, but her tone wasn't serious, "or they'll be shipping you off to Jupiter."

"I suppose so," Jair said glumly. "I'm not sure that it wouldn't be an improvement over some of the places I do go. At least, they don't have Thought Police on the satellites of Jupiter."

"Poor boy," Cybele said sympathetically. "You know, Jair, it's silly for you to have to stay around here waiting for me. I still have to do another show. Why don't you run back to the hotel and wait for me there? I'll come as soon as I'm off."

"Maybe I will," Jair said. "But hurry up."

As Jair left the club, Alecto Numa showed up promptly, still chewing on the last bite of his dinner. They rode back to the hotel in silence. Jair found a comfortable chair in the lobby and read until he saw Cybele come in. He waited a few minutes, then went to the visiphone booth and called her room.

She smiled when she saw who was calling. "Come right up," she said.

Jair left the booth and walked toward the elevators. Alecto Numa fell into step behind him. Jair stopped and turned around.

"Alecto, old friend," he said, "I appreciate your loyal companionship, but there are times when a man likes to be alone. Why don't you go somewhere and shine your badge for a while?"

"Why?"

"I'm not sure," Jair said, "that Nike has bees and flowers, so an explanation might get out of hand. But I give you my word that I have no intention of leaving this hotel in the immediate future."

"The corridor outside of her room will be quite comfortable," Alecto said stolidly.

"You do have the soul of a policeman," Jair murmured as he strode toward the elevators. The two of them rode up in silence to the sixtieth floor.

As they walked down the corridor, Jair saw Caristia step out of Cybele's room and enter the room across the hall. It seemed to him that she smiled as she glanced in his direction, but he wasn't sure.

"Now there," said Jair, pointing toward the door through which Caristia had vanished, "might be a better way to occupy yourself. A lovely maid, far from her home and lonely. You should be worrying about her security instead of mine."

"Terran women," Alecto said shortly, disgust in his voice.

"All right," Jair said with a sigh. "Just don't forget—Peeping Toms are still frowned upon in the best circles."

He hesitated a moment before Cybele's door, hoping that she had no fear of burglars. He still remembered the bellboy's description of the efficiency of the various rays which protected each room in the hotel. Then he tapped lightly on the door.

After a moment it opened. Cybele, her long blonde hair curling around her bare shoulders, smiled a welcome. She was wearing a loose, filmy black negligee which he recognized as the work of the artisans of Alnilam. Like all of their work, the negligee was completely opaque—but became transparent the moment it touched flesh. The opaqueness returned as soon as contact was lost, resulting in seductive glimpses but no more than that.

Jair stepped inside and she closed the door. Somehow, he noted, she'd managed to make the hotel room take on overtones of her own personality. It looked as if she had lived in it a long time.

She brought out a bottle of brandy, imported from Alpheratz where they made the best brandy in the galaxy. They sipped and talked aimlessly, and the comfortably relaxed surface of the scene, Jair realized with a little amusement, intensified the excitement that trembled underneath.

After a time, Jair walked across the room and pulled open the upper curtain on the window. He looked out at the stars, so strangely different from the Terra-view. Close was the shadowy dark moon and below it, gleaming with a pale green fire, rode the planet Pax. Spinning against the vast darkness of space, it looked like a peaceful green ocean on the verge of breaking into gently surging waves.

He crossed the room suddenly and took Cybele in his arms. She came willingly and he had the feeling that for that moment they were isolated, living in a world of their own with only the spinning green ocean watching through the window.

Her lips parted gently under his. He could feel her heart pounding. Once he pulled away to stare into her eyes. Then he came back to her and there was a single purpose in the way their lips met for the second time.

Through the window he could still see the spinning green world that looked like an ocean and the tiny star-lights that rode the dark sea beyond. It seemed to him that the scattered stars, each a mighty separate world, shimmered in tune with his pulse. Their twinkling lights changed subtly to a throbbing rhythm, drawing close together until there was only one great light in the skies. It glared fiercely for a moment, then showered explosively, cascading the stars through space.

After a moment, there was only the faint green planet riding serenely above the horizon of Nike.

HE LIGHTED cigarettes for them both and they held hands loosely as they stared through the window at the distant Pax.

Slowly he slipped from the grip of the moment, the green planet beginning once more to dominate his thoughts instead of his vision.

As though sensing the change in his mood, Cybele walked across the room and poured them fresh drinks. Jair took the one she offered and smiled his thanks as he lifted it.

"To us," he said.

"To us," she repeated.

It was three or four brandies later that Jair had an idea. Relaxed as he was, content with both company and liquor, his mind had already begun to nibble at the problem which confronted him. He'd loosely mapped out his next step, the only question being how to carry it out without the interference of Alecto Numa. It was as Cybele poured them fresh drinks that he began to see

a way out. First, it involved continuing the drinking until Cybele reached her limit. He had a brief qualm about using her, but dismissed it with the thought that it couldn't hurt her except for a slight hangover.

So they drank brandy and talked, with laughter ringing frequently in the room.

There were a couple of times when Jair had the impression that Cybele had guessed his intentions and was amused. But she continued to match him drink for drink. He became aware that the brandy seemed to have no effect on her about the time they had cracked the second bottle. Not only that, but she gave every indication of becoming amorous again. Normally, he would have welcomed the signs, but he'd already determined to get to work without further dalliance.

In the midst of drink, a startled expression appeared on Cybele's face. She toppled over, the brandy splashing the carpeting. Jair bent over and saw that she was completely unconscious, although breathing easily. He lifted her and placed her gently on the bed.

Looking around, he soon found the concealed fire escape. He stepped in and and spiraled down to the next floor. It would have been better to go all the way, but he was not sure where the main exit might be. He took a moment to examine the lock which was on the outside of all fire escape doors; then he activated the electronic ring on his left hand, pressed it against the lock, and stepped into a fifty-ninth floor room. He had one glimpse of the frightened expression on the faces of the Algenibian housewife and the Hamalian spacing-salesman who had slipped away to Nike for a weekend, then he was across the room. He closed the door gently on the belated curse of the salesman from Hamal and caught the next elevator going down.

IX

AN AIR-CAB carried him back to the section of the city he'd visited that afternoon. This time, when he stepped out in front of *The Nikean Lair*, there was no stocky Security Policeman at his elbow. He grinned with relief and went inside.

The Nikean Lair was a replica of thousands of bars all over the galaxy. The lights were dim; there was a haze of smoke over the room. Jair's eyes adjusted to the gloom and he could see the faces turning to look at him. The only sound in the room was the occasional clink of glasses. The men in the room were a grim, sullen looking lot. On each face, in addition to the omnipresent Nikean scowl, was an expression common to this sort of bar.

Jair could see that the air-cab driver had been right when he'd assured him that this was a place where he could buy anything, including murder.

He walked across to the bar, conscious of the eyes that followed him, and ordered a drink.

The bartender brought him his drink and stood glaring at him. Jair tossed it off. He pulled a thick roll of bills from his pocket, stripped off one and tossed it to the bar. Only after he had returned the money to his pocket did he look up to meet the gaze of the bartender.

"I'm looking for a man," he said. "A man who likes money and doesn't care how he earns it."

The bartender stared at him for a minute, then grinned wolfishly. He jerked his thumb in the direction of a table. "You might ask them," he said. He scooped up the bill on the bar and made no motion at all toward giving change.

Jair walked across to the table where three hard-bitten men sat. He ignored the empty chair at the table, pulling over a chair from another table and sitting down so that his back was to the wall. His act brought a thin smile of appreciation from one of the three men. He repeated what he'd said to the bartender.

"If there were such a man," one of them said slowly, "what would he have to do?"

"I want two things," Jair said, "and I'm willing to pay well for both of them. I understand there is a Nikean law making it illegal to go from here to Pax. I want to go to Pax."

The man nodded. "What else?"

"I want to buy the name of another man. The name of the man—Nikean or Paxian—who is in charge of sabotage of Federation industries."

"That's all?"

"That's all. I'll pay for the name. After that, I'll handle it myself."

The three men smiled at each other, and again Jair had the impression that they were laughing at him. One of the men turned back to him and nodded.

"Those things can be bought," he admitted. "There isn't a man in this room who couldn't agree to take you to Pax —for a price—and anyone of us could name the man you mention—again for a price."

"All right then," Jaid said, when the other didn't continue, "which one do I do business with? You?"

"Perhaps," the man said. "You must understand, Terran, that such things are well organized on Nike. We do not conduct such affairs in the careless fashion of Terra. You, in turn, should be thankful that this is so."

"Why?" asked Jair in surprise.

"Because just as each man here could do what you ask, so could each man knock you over the head and relieve you of the money you carry without performing any other service for you. The only reason it hasn't already been done is because everything must be cleared before it can be undertaken."

"Cleared?"

"Yes . . . each of us here belongs to the Nikean Crime Syndicate. Such things as you ask must be taken up with the Syndicate. They will fix the price and decide who is to act for you."

"That's a twist," Jair said. "Do you pay dues, or what?"

"They take a percentage of each job. But then, in turn, part of what they take goes to the Glorious Leader of Nike in order to insure that the right kind of laws are passed and that it will not go too badly with us for the laws we do break. You understand?"

"It's quite a racket," Jair said dryly. "Where do I find this Crime Syndicate?"

"In the Crime Syndicate Building. Any air-cab can take you there."

"And whom do I see?"

"The Leader of the Crime Syndicate is Orcus. But you may have to be content to speak with one of his aides."

"Thanks," Jair said. He got up and left the bar. He soon found a cab and gave the driver the name of the building he wanted.

He was feeling content. He had always tried to operate within the terms of the culture of the planet on which he was working, and he had early decided that bribery would be his strongest ally on Nike. He realized that there were certain things it might not accomplish—they'd want to preserve the profit of their adventures through the Federation—but up to that point he should be able to cash in on their individual cupidity.

THE Crime Syndicate Building was the most prosperous looking building he'd yet seen in Niketa. It was all of a hundred stories high and followed the usual Nikean architecture, with the addition of turrets and stone replicas of energy guns on every floor. Although it was, by this time, quite late at night, the entire building was ablaze with lights.

Inside, he was stopped by a hard-faced man, who was obviously wearing a blaster beneath his tight-fitting jacket.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to see Orcus," Jair said.

"Why?"

"I'll discuss that with Orcus," Jair said. "Just tell him that I represent the richest individuals in the Federation."

"You're the Terran who was at *The Nikean Lair*?"

Jair nodded. He was not too surprised. He'd expected that the man he'd talked

to might phone ahead.

"Orcus will see you," the man said. "Come on."

He led the way back to an elevator operated by another hard-faced man. Jair was unable to tell how far up they traveled. When the elevator stopped, he followed the first man out into the hallway. After a short walk, the man threw open a door and motioned Jair in.

"Here he is, boss," he said.

The door closed behind Jair, and he found himself facing a fat man who sat behind a huge desk. This man, too, was tough looking—but there was a veneer of success and wealth over his hardness. He wore a number of brilliant rings on his pudgy hands, but Jair suspected they were really camouflaged ray-rings. A jagged scar across the man's cheek gave him a piratical appearance.

"So you're the Terran who wants to throw away his money?" the fat man said with a grin. "Well, I'm Orcus."

"I'm Jair Holding," Jair said, and had the feeling that this was not news to Orcus. "I want to go to Pax. Can you arrange it?"

"Maybe," the fat man grunted.

"How much?"

"For fifty thousand credits," Orcus said, "I will guarantee to do my best to deliver you to Pax."

"For fifty thousand credits you should guarantee to land me on Pax, not just do your best."

The fat man shrugged. "I cannot guarantee what the planet of Pax may do. I can only speak for my own performance."

It was logical, but Jair sensed an evasion. Still the decision would not be entirely his.

"There is one other thing I want," he said. "Since everyone else seems to know about it, you probably know that I've been hired to investigate a matter of industrial sabotage throughout the galaxy. We know that the sabotage is directed from either Nike or Pax. I want the name of the man who directs it."

"I can tell you," Orcus said, with a grin. "Another fifty thousand credits."

"Payable when?" Jair asked.

"Both amounts payable in advance."

"What guarantee do I have that you won't just take the money and not deliver?"

"None," Orcus said. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "That's the way it is. Take it or leave it."

"All right," Jair said. "Can I use a visiphone—privately?"

ORCUS nodded and indicated a door near his desk. Jair went through it and found himself in an empty office. There was a visiphone set on the desk.

When Benson appeared on the screen, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Jair explained the situation to him. After a moment of consideration, Benson told him to go ahead.

"All right," Jair said as he came back into the fat man's office. "The A.G.I. is sending you the hundred thousand. You'll get a verification here within a few minutes."

Orcus nodded. "Do you mind if I work until then?" he asked. "We'll leave as soon as the verification arrives. I'll take you myself."

Work, for the head of the Crime Syndicate, seemed to consist of staring blankly at the sheets of paper on his desk. Within ten minutes, the visiscreen on his desk lit up. There was no sound, but it must have offered visual verification of the credit-draft from Terra, for as it went off Orcus looked up and nodded.

"Let's go, Holding," he said.

They went out and down in the elevator. In the lobby there were three men waiting. The five of them went out and climbed into an air-limousine.

A few minutes later they set down on what was obviously a private spaceport. They went directly to a small cruiser, and were soon in the air.

Once they were above the city, the ship leaped forward to full cruising speed. The green ball that was Pax was

dead ahead on the pilot-screen.

"This is a very interesting organization you have," Jair said to Orcus. "I'd like to know more about it."

"When you return from Pax," Orcus said, "if you return—and if the Nikean police don't arrest you, since it is illegal to attempt a trip to Pax—I'll be glad to personally show you around."

"You sound very sure of yourself."

I am," Orcus said. There was laughter in the gaze he bent on Jair.

A dark suspicion which had been steadily growing in Jair's mind came to full flower. "Orcus," he said casually, "since you've been paid to give me the name of the man who directs the sabotage, don't you think you might tell me now?"

"Sure," the fat man said. "His name is Orcus."

JAIR nodded. His eyes measured the fat man and for the first time in his life he wished that he went armed.

"In a way that's my own fault," he said calmly. "I should have guessed that a crime syndicate would embrace all the outside crime as well. I was a little slow on that one."

Orcus interlaced his pudgy fingers. "I like you, Holding," he said.

"At least, that's a switch," Jair murmured.

"I don't mean that I like you personally," Orcus protested. "But I like your style. In fact, you're the first Terran who has ever puzzled me for more than a imnute. And I admit you have me puzzled."

"Flatterer," Jair murmured.

"My best men," Orcus continued, "have been unable to spot anyone helping you. The police have also failed. We have been unable to discover any unsual talents in you. Despite this, the Projectile-Crane failed on Terra, and at the last minute you failed to step through the emergency door on the ship. Why?"

"I eat my Milky Way wheaties every morning," Jair said. He had the feeling that Orcus was about to talk more than was his wont; and if that were so, the implication was that he meant to get rid of Jair, probably by killing him. Jair glanced at the position of the men, estimating his chances.

"You don't even seem to know how you avoided those two accidents yourself," Orcus went on, "but you did—and that's something no one else has been able to do when I planned an accident."

"I haven't had an accident since landing on Nike. Are you slipping, Orcus?"

"No. I've been waiting, Terran. I admit that I made a slight mistake with the first investigator that your A. G. I. sent to Nike. It seemed rather amusing at the time to have *him* arrested and convicted of sabotage on his own confession. It never occurred to me that the Federation would make such a fuss about one ordinary investigator. They've never stopped." He sounded petulant.

"You could still get around that by releasing him," Jair suggested.

"It's too late," Orcus said blandly. "Shortly after you landed today, the poor fellow committed suicide in his cell. Most unfortunate."

"Was that another compliment to me?" Jair asked. "Afraid he might tell me something?"

"It occurred to me," Orcus admitted, "that you might draw certain conclusions where others had failed . . . then there was the fellow who had a fatal accident on Nike when he mistook a window for a door. Even that seemed to raise a fuss among you silly Terrans. Since then I've arranged for the accidents to happen away from Nike. It makes everything more pleasant. And that is why there have been no more accidents since you arrived on Nike."

"Thanks," Jair said with irony. "Since you're breaking down and giving me your girlish confidences, I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how you work the sabotage?"

"It would be pointless," Orcus said, waving a fat hand. "If I told you, you'd have nothing to look forward to, noth-

ing to give you an interest in life. You might even lose your interest in Pax."

"I'm already losing much of my interest in Pax," Jair said. "You're beginning to eclipse Pax."

"Your idea about the planet was amusing," Orcus said. "I suppose it was because you knew so little about it. You may not believe me, but we know no more. To the best of my knowledge, I have never seen a Paxian. All communication between the two planets was broken off several centuries ago. I do know that Paxians are from the same original stock as Nikeans; that they have the same abilities we do, yet have done nothing to further themselves as we have. The only conclusion to be drawn is that they are backward, perhaps even defective. We Nikeans are ashamed that such people, coming from our own glorious stock, still exist. But we can do nothing about it."

"Under the circumstances," Jair said carefully, "I see no reason why we should go on to Pax."

"We haven't been for some time," Orcus murmured. "Hadn't you noticed?"

Jair became aware that this was true. The ship was motionless in space.

"Pax is surrounded with a force field —of their own devising," Orcus said. "No ship—nothing can get through it. That's why we can do nothing about eliminating them."

Once again, Jair Holding had the feeling that Orcus—and all Nikeans—were laughing at him. Rage boiled up within him. Without stopping to think, he threw his right fist at Orcus' jaw. It was a good punch, but it never landed.

There was a sharp pain inside his head, swiftly and ruthlessly cutting through his every thought. He was about to scream when the welcome blackness flooded over him.

X

THERE was pressure all along his back and legs—soft and giving, yet solid. From nearby there was a soft sound, like a thousand people singing. A gentle, nagging pain in his head was subsiding. He felt limp, unable to move.

He opened his eyes lazily and saw a medium-sized ship rising into the air above him. For the moment it brought no recognition to him. He watched and wondered idly why there were no red tongues of flame licking out from the jets.

Then it came back to him with a rush. He knew he was lying on the ground and the ship above was the one belonging to Orcus. He remembered throwing the punch on the ship, the sharp pain in his head and the beginning of the blackout. He knew that Orcus had tossed him out somewhere and was going back to Nike. But where? They hadn't been able to reach Pax. . . .

He raised himself on one elbow and stared into space. He could see the green planet. Off to one side there was a purplish mass that must be—Nike! Where *was* he? He looked around and saw he was lying on dark grass, not far from a number of strange, curling trees. It was almost light around him, but it was apparently still dark on the two planets. Regulus was nowhere in sight, although he could see a beginning glow beyond one rim of Pax which he guessed was the sun.

Suddenly he realized he was on the dark moon, Losna. He could not remember having heard of any life on it. Was this to be his "accident," he wondered. The Nikeans could claim that he'd gone to Pax. There would be little chance that Benson and the A. G. I. could prove otherwise, especially if no ships could get through to Pax to check.

He looked around and knew that the sound he'd heard was no more than a soft wind blowing through the lace-like trees.

The ship was far into the sky now, only a faint speck against the blackness. Jair got to his feet, fighting off the nausea that swept over him. When it had passed, he set out to explore the moon.

The land was dimly lighted by the two planets and he could easily see to thread his way through the scattered trees. He found a spring of fresh water and quenched his thirst. He noted the abundance of berries, growing thickly on low bushes. While they looked like nothing he'd seen before, they might provide food.

The great sun Regulus came up above the horizon of the distant green planet and Losna was flooded with light. Jair continued to pick his way through brush and over hillocks, searching for some sign of life. But nowhere did he discover so much as a single bird. When the wind was still, the satellite was filled with an awful quiet.

It was hours later that he found himself high on a craggy hill overlooking the beach where he'd found himself earlier. He had circled around, coming up behind it. He stood there, filled with futility, and stared out at the distant planets.

He had stared at a small speck in space for several minutes before he realized it was getting larger. It was some kind of ship and it was heading for Losna.

HE RAN down the hill, crashing through the brush, oblivious to the branches that whipped across his face. He stopped his headlong dash only when he reached the edge of the small beach. By this time he could make out the lines of the approaching ship. He flopped down behind a tree and waited. It might be Orcus, returning to complete what he'd started, or it might be someone who would rescue him.

The small ship came down on the beach with a silent rush. It settled to the ground and its air-lock swung open, but no one came out.

Jair waited, cramped muscles protesting, for almost an hour. Finally, he got to his feet and approached the ship. He glanced through the air-lock, but could see no sign of a pilot. At last he climbed cautiously inside the ship—

There was only the slightest sound, but it brought Jair whipping around—in time to see the air-lock swing shut. A moment later, the ship surged into the air.

Fear rooted him to the one spot for several more minutes. But when nothing happened, he went exploring. It didn't take long to determine that he was the only person on the ship. He tried the controls on the ship, but nothing altered its course or speed. He was a prisoner on a pilotless ship, destination unknown.

After a time, reason came to his aid and he ceased his aimless prowling over the ship. There was nothing he could do until it landed. As he calmed down, he became sure that it was returning him to Nike. From the moment of regaining consciousness on Losna, a suspicion had been growing in his mind. He was almost sure he knew the answer to the sabotage of Federation industry, but it was an answer so wild, so improbable in the face of what was known in the galaxy, that he knew he'd have to find proof.

The ship came to rest and the air-lock swung open. Jair stepped out and knew he was on Nike. He could see the towering buildings of Niketa in the distance. He turned—and found himself staring into the stolid features of Alecto Numa.

For a moment they stared at each other, then Jair laughed. "If I had thought of it," he said, "I would have made a bet with myself that you would show up the minute I landed."

This was his first test and he knew it. But he pushed it from his mind, thinking only that Alecto Numa was like all good policemen, unemotionally turning up at the proper time and in the proper place.

"It is my job," Alecto said, and Jair knew that he had passed the first test. "I would have never been away from you except that someone helped you to trick me."

"Nobody helped me," Jair said, and

wondered if it were true. "And you could have saved time by just staying at the hotel this morning, for that's where I'm going. I'm going to get some sleep before I do anything else."

Alecto Numa shook his head. "No," he said stolidly. "You cannot go to the hotel yet. First you must come with me."

"Where?" Jair asked . . . but he had suddenly glimpsed the air-car in the background, and he knew that he would have no chance to rest before the more serious test came.

"To the Thought Police."

"And if I don't choose to go?" He thought he detected a gleam of hope in Alecto's eyes. "Never mind," he said. "I'll go quietly."

THEY climbed into the air-car. It was driven by a man who might have been turned out by the same stamp that produced Alecto. The car took to the air with a swift rush.

A few minutes later it landed on the roof of a silver building which Jair knew must be police headquarters. Alecto motioned for him to go first, and they went down the stairs and into a small room. Jair held himself stiffly, thinking of the possible reasons they might give for his arrest.

There were a number of silver-uniformed men in the room, one of them of the group that had raided the gambling room the night before—the one who had questioned him. He looked at Alecto in silent dismissal and the Security Policeman withdrew.

"What's the charge this time?" Jair asked, voicing the thought he'd kept in his mind.

"Attempting to go to Pax," the officer said. "It is forbidden under Nikean state law."

"But I never got there," Jair said.

"But you tried," the officer said. "It is that for which you are arrested. But you will be examined for other things."

"Such as?"

"Being able to avoid two accidents arranged by Crime Syndicate Leader Orcus. Winning on a Nikean gambling game. Tricking Security Police Officer Numa by blanking your movements. Resisting what should have been a fatal stroke from Orcus."

He'd been right, Jair realized—then tried to suppress the thought. When he looked at the officer's face he knew he'd made the slip. The test he'd set for himself was over, and now he had very little chance of ever leaving the silver building.

The officer was looking at him intently and Jair could almost catch his full thought. Almost, but not quite. It was the sort of feeling he'd had so many times before and always dismissed as intuition or as something a face had betrayed; this time, however, he not only sensed the meaning of the question in the officer's mind, but felt that if he only knew some little trick of the mind he'd be able to know the whole thought just as if it had been spoken aloud.

"How did you know?" the officer finally said aloud.

"That you are a race of telepaths?" Jair said wearily. He knew now that he didn't have to speak the words, but he did anyway. "I'm not sure, but I think it was partly what happened with Orcus and partly lying on Losna watching his ship leave and realizing that there were no flames coming from the jets. And I was sure about it when Alecto Numa was already there to meet me when the ship set me down on Nike." He paused a moment. "That is the secret of Nikean ship engines, isn't it? They are powered by mental energy?"

"Yes. Normally, we provide the ships with jet flames when there is a chance that they will be observed, but Orcus thought you were dead when he left you on Losna."

"And Orcus did try to kill me?"

"Yes," the officer said with a grin. "You were punished with a mind-blow. Like this—" and there was a brief sharp pain in Jair's head. "Orcus used the same thing with greater strength. It

should have killed you. We didn't understand why, but now we know."

"You're still making the mistake of thinking somebody helped me."

"Not then. That's why Orcus took the other three with him. They were watching for interference and there was none. The blow failed to kill you because of some resistance which you brought up in yourself at the last minute. I think you must be a latent telepath yourself, very near to the threshold. It is too bad that we can't afford to experiment with you. There are things we might learn."

"Such as?"

"Later. First, we must once more test you."

Jair noticed that a large machine was being pushed nearer. "Is this the same thing you used last night?"

"Yes," the officer said. "The Penetration Field. Sit down."

JAIR SAT in the chair. He wanted to make some gesture of defiance, but his triumphs had been too few. So, knowing it was childish, he flaunted the only one: "At least," he said, "I kept you from knowing that I'd guessed you were telepaths for a while. Alecto didn't get it and neither did you for a time."

The officer smiled as the electrodes were fastened to Jair's head. "Only because we weren't trying," he said. "You can't conceal by that method. The Terran before you—what was his name? Dorn Roberts?—tried to do it by thinking about some sort of silly Terran rimes. But Orcus knew that he'd guessed we were telepaths."

"And killed him for knowing," Jair said.

The officer was paying no attention. Another officer had turned on the machine and again there was the hum of power and Jair felt the strange sensations in his scalp. Something passed silently between the two men and then the machine was shut off. The electrodes were taken from Jair's head.

"Why isn't that machine run by mental energy?" Jair asked.

"Only recently," the officer answered, "we've begun building machines that can use other power and do certain things we cannot do mentally. This machine is one of those."

"What does it do?"

"The only alternative to the existence of someone who is helping you is that you might have greater abilities than we have guessed, including the ability to shield a part of your mind. Such shields are not impossible, but we have never been able to develop them. Neither can we detect such mind shields . . . but this machine can. Last night it gave a negative result for you, but after Orcus' failure to kill you we thought we'd better try it again."

"I could use a good shield," Jair said dryly.

"Perhaps you would develop one if properly trained," the officer said. "That may be the reason you managed enough resistance at the last moment to save your life. That is also why it is too bad we cannot experiment with you. We might learn how to shield ourselves. But it is even more important that we learn the source of your help."

"What makes you so sure I had help?" Jair asked. He didn't think himself that there had been any help; but if there were, he wanted to offer any protection he could. He knew he would soon need help more than ever before. "The accidents may have failed for other reasons."

"They could have," the officer admitted. "But, for example, you couldn't have won that gambling game last night."

"You mean that was a mental contest?"

"Yes. Between the house man and the player. While you might be able to learn in time, you do not now have the ability to lift one of those balls. Someone did it for you, and it was meant to express contempt for us."

"But maybe another player did it. As a joke."

"Nikeans wouldn't consider that a joke. Besides, we went through the entire room and no one had a memory of it. Someone had to do it. Someone with a shield. Now do you see why we have to find the person?"

"But I've told you that I know nothing about any help," Jair said desperately. "You're able to read my thoughts so you must know that I'm telling the truth."

"As you know it, yes. But it may be that you have some knowledge of it buried beneath your conscious mind, or even a clue to who it might be. We must find out."

XI

JAIR HAD no idea of what was coming, but he guessed it had something to do with the telepathic ability of the Nikeans. The officer had stopped talking and was staring at him with a fixed concentration.

Then Jair felt it. It was only the barest sensation within his mind at first, but it continued, spreading out. It was as if something had invaded his mind, was crawling along the tissues of his brain. As though from a great distance, he heard a sound from himself and knew that it came not from pain but from horror. The Nikean was no longer content with merely picking off his thoughts, but somehow had forced his way into his mind and was ruthlessly searching out every memory.

Without knowing how, Jair tried to resist. He tried to push this alien touch from his mind, to block out the horror. But the sensation continued, like small fingers feeling their way through his brain. There was no pain, only a sickening sense of obscene invasion.

It seemed that nothing could be worse, but a moment later it was. Jair was suddenly aware that another mind had also forced its way into his. At first he thought that it had come to share in the officer's mental rape, but then he realized that the first mind had stopped on becoming aware of the second one.

A silent struggle began within his mind, one in which he took no part. The knowledge that his brain was being turned into a battlefield for two others drove him almost to the brink of insanity . . . he could feel reality slipping away from him, and he struggled to retain it.

Then both minds were gone from his. He sat slumped in his chair for a moment, not interested in anything but his restored freedom.

Finally, he was able to look up. The officer still stood in front of him, strain showing on his face. And something else ,too . . . anger mixed with a shade of fear.

"Now can you say you have no help?" the officer asked hoarsely. "Who was it? Did you recognize the mind?"

Jair merely shook his head. It had never occurred to him that he might recognize a mind that had taken possession of his own. Now he could remember nothing of it. All he could remember was the horror that had crawled through his brain.

He saw the anger increasing in the officer's face and knew somehow that it was now directed against him. He knew that the anger was going to be expressed, but he was powerless to protect himself in any way.

Suddenly the officer stumbled backward, his face going pale with pain. It lasted but a moment, yet Jair somehow knew that the officer had been given a mental blow such as he had twice experienced. He felt sure that it had come from the person who was helping him.

The officer had recovered, but stood for a moment in an attitude of listening. Then he grinned mirthlessly at Jair.

"I was going to kill you," he said, "but Orcus has a better idea. These two interventions were enough for us to get a general idea of which part of the city she's in. We'll throw you in prison. Sooner or later, she'll come to your aid again and we'll be ready. We'll find out

exactly where she is."

"She?" Jair asked.

"She," the officer repeated. He stared brightly at Jair. "It was a woman both times—the one who drove me out of your mind and the one who struck me when I thought of killing you. Know who she is?"

Jair didn't even permit himself to think, not even to guess. He forced his mind to seize on something else that the officer had said.

"Orcus?" he asked. "He suggested that I be thrown in prison? Do you mean that he is—listening to what's going on here?"

"Orcus and many others are beamed on you. We will all stay beamed on you until she comes to your aid again. Then we'll have her."

He must have given a mental order, for two of the silver-uniformed men came and took Jair by the arms. They marched him out of the office, wearing their usual looks of hostility.

THE PRISON proved to be underground, but a part of the same building. There was tier after tier of cells with iron-barred doors, not too different from the prisons on Terra.

As they marched along he saw one thing different from any prison he'd seen before. High over the door of each cell was a suspended chair in which sat a uniformed Nikean. Not one of them seemed to be paying attention to anything that went on, but sat unmoving in his chair as though in a trance.

"What are they doing?" he asked the officers.

"Mental warders," one of the officers grunted.

They came to an empty cell. Above it, a warder sat alert. He grinned as he caught sight of the Terran.

A moment later the door clanged shut on Jair and he dropped down on a crude bench, wondering about the duties of a mental warder. He didn't have long to wonder.

[*Turn page*]

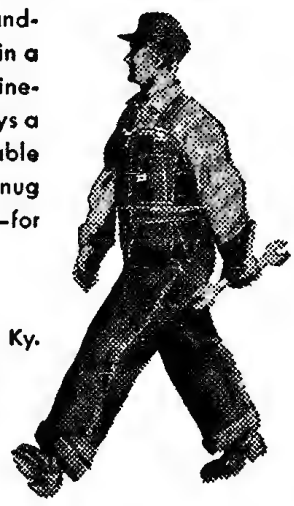


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The sharp knife-like pain, which he'd come to recognize, struck inside his head. It last only a second. When he looked up, he saw the warder had leaned over and was peering into the cell. He was grinning happily.

"I'll tell you what a mental warder is, Terran," he said, "before I really go to work. It's too bad that you have no access to my thoughts, for it makes it more fun when you can see everything before it arrives. But I'll tell you, and then it will be almost as much fun. Everything that happens to you from now on will come from me. I have nothing to do, but take care of you. For example—"

Jair felt the sort of dizziness he had experienced on the ship, and when it had passed he saw that one wall of the cell had vanished. Beyond it, he could see a pleasant green field. In the center of the field stood a blonde girl, looking something like Cybele. She was completely nude. She seemed to catch sight of Jair and beckoned to him.

The dizziness came again and then the prison wall was back in place.

"Nice, huh?" the warder said. "Of course, that's one of the more pleasant things. At first, you'll know that it's an illusion and you'll be able to sit back and enjoy it. But after you've been here a while, it'll become more real and there'll finally come a time when you see something like that and you'll jump up and run into the wall as fast as you can." He laughed. "Or, for example—"

The bench on which Jair sat suddenly leaped into the air, taking him with it. It tilted and spilled him to the floor of the cell. He looked up from the floor to see the bench swooping down upon him. He ducked, but even so he felt the heavy wood brush his hair. There was a clatter as the bench resumed its place. The warder laughed again.

"And that was no illusion," he said. "I've got very good control on teleports, although you can never tell when I'm apt to misjudge a fraction—even on purpose. Hold out your hand, Terran."

Jair thought of trying to resist, but decided that he might as well learn what he was up against. He thrust out his hand.

Nothing happened for a moment, then the tip of one finger began to feel warm. The feeling grew until the finger was so hot he had to bite his lip to keep from crying out. He thought that he saw a tiny flame lick up from the tip of the finger; then the heat subsided. He looked at the finger and saw there was a blister on it.

"You're a pleasant little character, aren't you?" Jair said, speaking for the first time. "We have characters like you on Terra, but since they don't have your special abilities they never get much farther than tearing the wings off flies and mistreating their children."

"They are missing much," the warder said, unoffended by Jair's atttude. "But now I must really get to work and that will mean no talking."

He swung up out of sight.

JAIR waited, wondering what would happen next. He became aware that his hands were tightly clenched and he forced them to relax.

Once he found himself on the point of thinking about Cybele Rilka, but he quickly turned his thoughts to Orcus. Remembering that the officer had mentioned that Orcus would be "beamed" on him, he concentrated on thinking insulting things. He found a certain pleasure in this.

His attention was centered on this and it was several minutes before he became aware that something was moving near his foot. He looked down and saw that a small snake was trying to crawl up his pants. He leaped away before he realized that this must be another illusion, and before he could recover, the bench swung up from the floor and butted him in the stomach. It was a hard blow, knocking him off his feet, and he had trouble getting his breath.

Without warning, the pain struck in

his head again, doubling him up in a spasm of suffering. Then it was gone and in its place there were the crawling fingers in his brain. Despite the sickness it brought, he began to recognize that there was a difference in minds. There had been a ruthless quality present when the officer had invaded his mind, but it had been clean and purposeful; this mind was what he'd always imagined an idiot's mind must be like. It gave off a sort of obscene chortling as it crept into his thoughts.

Fight back.

It was the first clear-cut thought he'd ever received. He recognized it and knew that it was directed toward him.

"Don't," he cried his thought aloud. "Don't help me. They'll find you."

Don't worry about them. There was contempt in the thought. *I'll help you. Fight back. Like this.*

He found the trick of pushing with his mind and felt the crawling horror reluctantly retreating.

Now, you must strike back quickly. We'll do it together. This is what you must do.

Somehow he found a way to coalesce the hatred he felt for the warder and then to thrust it out. With it he felt the thrust of the other mind and sensed how powerful it was.

He heard a cry from outside the cell and a moment later the body of the warder sprawled to the floor in front of the cell. He waited for a cry of alarm to go up.

The warders are aware of nothing beyond the cells upon which they concentrate. The door of your cell . . . look at it. Think of it, of how it's held together.

He knew nothing of metals, yet he found he was getting a feeling, a sense of the pattern of the atoms within the barred door. He knew she was helping —but he was doing some of it too.

Now change the structure. Push here —and here.

He didn't understand the technique she used, but he knew he was learning. It was like learning to use a new muscle. He gathered strength and pushed.

The door vanished and on the floor there was only a pile of rust-colored dust.

Now hurry to the hotel. The Thought Police are closing in on me.

He leaped over the pile of dust and ran.

XII

NO ONE paid any attention to him as he ran through the prison. The warders and prisoners alike were busy. Here and there a prisoner screamed in sudden anguish. As soon as he realized that they were unaware of him, Jair ignored them. He reached the stairway that led to the building above and went up carefully.

There was no one in the corridor. He stepped into it and went cautiously past the offices. Soon he began to realize that the building was empty. The Thought Police must have gone to the hotel in force. He hurried out to the street.

The hotel was not far from the police building. He was afraid to trust himself to an air-car and to the possible probing mind of the chauffeur. He set out along the sidewalk, walking as fast as he could. He kept his head down and repeated to himself—I mustn't be late, I mustn't be late . . . he knew it wouldn't help if anyone really suspected him, but it might protect him from being revealed to any mind which just happened to brush against his.

When he reached the hotel he saw the horde of silver cars hovering in the air above it. He caught a glimpse of silver uniforms clustered at the side entrance. He hurried into the lobby.

On the far side of the lobby he saw Cybele Rilka standing, with her maid beside her. He started for them and felt the warm welcome that suddenly invaded his thoughts.

Then there was something else, and he faltered half-way across the lobby.

Yes. The thought confirmed it and

there was amusement in it. He knew where the thought had come from, could identify it as easily as if she'd spoken.

It came from Caristia, the maid.

Now he could see a little into Cybele's mind, could make out the sense of her thoughts though they were not clear. . . . A wave of cold hatred came from the blonde, powerful and rancid—the hatred that had first made him falter. And after Caristia's projected *yes*, the hatred had spread out to embrace her too.

He felt Cybele's hatred gathering together and knew that she was about to strike. His panic disorganized him, and he fumbled his attempt to strike first—

Suddenly the hatred was gone. He felt Cybele's scream inside his skull.

Tiny flames licked out around her body—then she burst into fire. Even where he stood he could feel the heat. He saw her face, twisted in agony, vanish behind flames as they leaped high in the air. The fire was fierce, but it lasted only a minute. And when it was gone, so was Cybele; there was only a charred horror on the floor of the lobby.

Some way he found himself beside Caristia, still trying to reject what he'd seen.

"It was her punishment," Caristia said aloud.

He looked at her blankly.

"I didn't do it," she answered him. "The Thought Police did it. Cybele was a Nikean. You were her job, but she fell down on it when she permitted interference. But, worse, she brought the interference—me—into Nike with her. So they destroyed her."

He realized that she was speaking aloud and that he could still sense some of her thoughts, but they were not clear as they had been before.

"Why are you talking?" he asked. "Have I already lost what I learned?"

"No," she said quickly. "You haven't learned enough yet, so I have to project the thoughts with tremendous force for you to get them clearly. Now I need the energy for other things. They are coming in."

"Why?" he asked. "When they can use their power at a distance, why are they coming here?"

"They can't strike at me directly," she said. "My shield is too strong. But there are many things they can do when they are near. You'll see. And you can help. You've learned how to push with your mind. Use it when you can." She reached over and took him by the hand.

THE silver clad men came into the lobby, walking carefully. There were dozens of them and beyond he could see more, a small army. He knew that there were still others in the hotel, blanketing every exit.

Suddenly a chair took off from the lobby floor and came whirling at them. It took Jair by surprise and he was still staring open-mouthed at it when it stopped suddenly in mid-air and crashed to the floor.

Then every object in the lobby took on a life of its own. Some of them darted directly toward the two of them while others circled around aimlessly only to veer in suddenly from an angle.

Hand in hand, Jair Holding and the girl Caristia stood and fought a stranger battle than any he'd ever imagined.

He knew that she was doing most of it; but he was learning to take part. He saw a huge vase hurtling toward them and thrust with his mind. He was pleased when it hesitated, then crashed on the floor. The next minute the broken, jagged pieces took off in low flight, whirling toward the Thought Police and he knew that she was doing it. He saw one man go down, blood streaming from his cheek.

After that, he learned not to stop to appreciate his new powers. He would pick out an object, push with his mind, and turn to meet another one. He became aware that many of the objects stopped in mid-air, then rushed back in the opposite direction and after a time he learned to do that too.

A chair near them burst into flames and smothered out almost as quickly.

Once he felt his own clothes getting hot and was aware that Caristia saved him when he stood in panic. Another time he felt the first flash of pain in his head and knew that he had pushed it away himself.

Some time later—he had no concept of time—he was aware that Caristia had kept the silver uniforms from fanning out. Those on the outer fringe dropped one after one, while a steady barrage of returning objects pressed the remainder into a tighter circle near the front of the lobby. He knew that she had some purpose in mind, but couldn't guess what. Now he could not even get a fragment of thought from her, and he realized she had blocked off her mind so that the Nikeans couldn't know what she was planning.

She pressed his hand and pulled him back until they were in the very corner of the lobby. Cautiously, the Thought Police started to spread out again. But before they could more than start, there was a crackling sound that grew into a roar and half the ceiling above the lobby dropped. Crash followed crash as floors above came bursting down and the clouds of plaster dust billowed around them.

Jair coughed, trying to peer through the dust.

"Close your eyes," Caristia said.

He obeyed, and felt a sudden lurch, in a direction he couldn't identify. Then he could feel fresh air and the choking dust was gone from his throat.

"Keep them closed," she whispered fiercely.

He clenched his eyelids tightly and wondered what was happening. His mind was filled with confusion, but he could still feel her hand in his, so he obeyed.

Then it was quiet. Her hand slipped from his and all he could feel was pressure against the bottoms of his feet.

"Open your eyes," she said.

He looked. They were standing in a small apartment. "What?" he said. "How?"

SHE laughed. "I teleported us here," she said. "I couldn't do it before, because they could have tracked us through your mind. But they were already afraid of me. Then we stood them off long enough to add to that fear. And when I brought the ceiling down, almost hitting them, almost trapping the ones above, their fear turned to panic for a moment. There is nothing that clutters up the mind like panic. There was enough of it concentrated there in the hotel to block off even the minds of the men like Orcus, who weren't there. It gave me enough time to teleport us here."

"Where is here?" Jair asked.

"A small apartment about ten blocks from the hotel. I took it early this morning. It's blocked off from their thoughts and it will take them at least two or three hours to realize that there is one apartment in the whole city that has a mental block on it. We won't need more than that."

Jair fell into the nearest chair and tried to pull himself into a more coherent state. There were so many things he wanted to know that he had no idea where to begin. Within the last few hours he had been plunged into a world so alien that it might have been something in another galaxy.

He looked across the room at Caristia. He knew now that he was seeing her with new eyes, that always before he had accepted her status as Cybele's maid without really seeing her; but he knew there was more than that to the change he saw. It was even more than the fact that her long black hair was now combed differently.

Then suddenly he knew what it was. Before there had been a certain slackness to her face, and now it was gone. He saw the real beauty—a beauty which was on the surface but was also deep within her.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He was startled and embarrassed by the fact that she'd read his thought.

"I don't think," he said, "that I could

ever get used to never being able to have a thought without having it overheard."

"Then develop your mind shield."

"Those things I did today—with your help," Jair said wonderingly, "do they mean that the officer was right today when he said I was a latent telepath?"

SHE nodded. "All of the human race are latent telepaths, and a few other races also," she said. "Some day they will all realize their full abilities, when they cease looking for power all over the universe and look within themselves, and when they cease to use the powers they do have to hurt others."

"If that has something to do with it," Jair asked, "why does it already exist here on Nike—where it has been used to hurt others?"

"I don't know why, but we were closer to it from the beginning than the rest of the human race in the galaxy. Just as Terrans never had wings, they were never so near to their full mental abilities. Nikeans have abused that ability, and so it has been limited in them."

"You are from Pax, aren't you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I know that in some ways you are stronger than the Nikeans," he said. "I suspect you're stronger in many other ways. Why haven't you Paxians done something about stopping the Nikeans?"

"We can't," she said, "any more than we can step in and stop Terrans, or Vegans, or Rigelians from exploiting and destroying other races throughout the galaxy. We cannot suddenly become the fathers and mothers of everyone else. If we were to stop the Nikeans in their chosen way of living, then we'd have to direct them in what to do instead, and we'd wind up as their rulers. Despite our intentions, this would be no better than what they are doing."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "But someone has to stop them. The amount of business they get in the Federation is unimportant, but the destruction they do in getting it is important."

She nodded. "When they first went into interplanetary business, the Nikeans used their special abilities only to find out secret information. But as they gained power, they began to want more. It was only recently that they started killing."

"And you can't even interfere when they kill?"

"Not directly. But indirectly we have interfered by the help I've given you."

"You mean the help was all planned?"

"Yes. Two months ago, Orcus knew that Fenning Benson intended hiring you if the others failed. Cybele Rilka was sent to work in the club near your office and to get to know you. We knew this, and I went to Terra and managed to be hired as Cybele's maid."

"It was Cybele who set fire to my apartment?"

"Yes. That's why she suggested meeting you at your apartment. When you told her where it was, the picture of it in your mind enabled her to 'see' it. She had started the fire before you were even out of the dressing room."

"How?"

"You'll learn," she said gently. "It is more important that you learn other steps first."

"But you say Cybele was sent to Terra because of me," he said, frowning. "Yet she already had a reputation throughout the galaxy as an entertainer. How did they arrange that?"

"She'd worked as an entertainer for many years. Always as a mind-reader too, which was very clever. She used all the tricks of regular mind-readers, so that if anyone ever became suspicious of some single accomplishment, it would be thought a trick too. Actually, she was there as one of the Nikean outposts. She fed information back to Orcus and carried out sabotage plans."

"Orcus is the head of it, then?"

"Yes. He is the head of the Crime Syndicate and the Trade Commission—they are almost the same organization—and of the Thought Police and Security

Police. He is the most powerful man in Nike and there are many who think he will one day take over the government. There is only one man above him—the Nikean dictator."

JAIR was silent for a moment. There was one question which was stirring up faint resentment in him. He knew she would get it anyway, so he put it into words. "But why me?" he asked. "I'm beginnig to feel that the whole battle between the Nikeans and the Federation—with you Paxians mixing in whenever you feel like it—is being centered on me. Why?"

"Because you're the man who will stop the role the Nikeans have been playing."

"But why me?" he repeated stubbornly. "There were investigators on this before me and there would have been more if I'd failed."

"You were the only one with a chance to succeed. Dorn Roberts accidentally stumbled on the answer, but he had no chance to do anything about it. You do."

"How do you know?"

"Nike," she said, and it seemed at first that she was speaking irrelevantly, "has maintained outposts throughout the galaxy. They have spotted the business deals, carried out the sabotage plans, and have kept in touch with the attempts of the A.G.I. to fight them. They have known in advance which investigator would next be hired. You are the first one to whom they assigned an operator. They were instinctively aware that you represented a greater threat, although they were never very certain of your latent abilities until today."

"But I didn't have that much ability."

"Potentially you did. Pax has also maintained outposts throughout the Federation. We have been interested in finding those like yourself. We have found many through the centuries. Some few have developed into full telepaths—after which most of them left their home planets. Those who didn't, lost the ability. When we spotted someone with the potential, we followed them and encouraged their development as much as we could . . . more we could not do. We spotted you five years ago."

He looked at her in surprise. "Is that why I had—intuitions?"

She shook her head. "No, those were merely the times when you came nearest to using your powers. Since even that gave you a higher success-potential, you were always being tempted to keep busy and make money. But you also had the impulse to get off and study yourself—to look for answers within yourself. All we did was to encourage these impulses."

"And I was your assignment as well as Cybele's?"

"Not at first. I knew about you, as I knew about the others in the Federation; but when we knew that A. G. I. would eventually use you in their battle against Nike and that you had the best chance of success, then you became my assignment."

"Why?"

"Mostly because in certain respects I am temporarily a higher-level telepath than others on Pax."

HE FELT that there was more to it than this, but he could catch none of her thoughts and he saw she intended to say no more about it.

"You stopped the bale of steel on Terra, and broke the illusion on the ship?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't they catch you?"

"Because I needed to drop my shield only for a moment. Too, they were not expecting interference. But even when they were looking for me it was only when I was in sustained contact with you that they were able to locate me."

"You were the one who won the gambling game for me?"

She giggled. "I couldn't resist the temptation. I knew it would make them furious. Afterwards I was sory, for it brought the Thought Police down on you."

"Something was said about Alecto Numa being blanked out at the hotel so that I could escape. You again?"

She nodded. "As soon as you entered Cybele's room," she said, "I threw a block around the room. But I had to keep Alecto and Cybele from becoming suspicious. So for Alecto I provided thought-patterns which imitated yours and Cybele's, and occasionally contacted him as Cybele alone—Nikeans are not even aware that thought patterns can be imitated. Then, for the benefit of Cybele, I provided occasional contacts from Alecto on the other side of the room block. Then, when I knew that you wanted to escape from the room, I blanked Cybele out. The brandy would never have accomplished it."

He tried to understand the complicated mental activities this had involved; then in the middle of it he realized the full significance of what she had said.

"Do you mean you knew—you were in contact with our minds in her room all the time I was there?" He'd never blushed in his life, but he was doing it now. He could feel the heat spreading over his whole body.

She laughed. For a moment he heard it and at the same time felt the laughter in his mind. There was a lilting, friendly feel to it.

"Now," she said firmly, "you must lie down and rest for as much time as possible. You had no sleep last night and you will soon need all of your energy."

He didn't feel like sleeping, but she insisted. He stretched out on the couch in the apartment and closed his eyes. He was so keyed up that he felt he'd never sleep again. But after a moment his crowded thoughts were pushed out by soft music that flooded his mind. He knew that Caristia was doing it. He relaxed and fell asleep.

XIII

HER thoughts, gentle but insistent, pulled him out of sleep. He tried to pretend that he wasn't yet awake, for he found it a pleasant experience. Her thought-laughter cut through his pretense, so he opened his eyes. Then he was glad he'd done so.

While he'd slept, she had changed clothes. Now, in the place of the shapeless robe she'd always worn, she had on a modern, well-fitted dress. Her figure was the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

He caught the fleeting pleasure-thought in her mind before her shield cut it off.

"Thank you," she said, with a little smile. "But now we must go to work. We have a margin of about thirty minutes and then we must leave this apartment."

He sat up on the couch, forcing his mind to other realities.

"What kind of work?" he asked.

"Training your abilities."

"Then why must we continue talking?" he asked. "It seems to me that I can get your thoughts clearer now—at least when you don't use your shield. Or am I only imagining it?"

"You're not imagining it . . . but there are other aspects which you need more."

So under her guidance Jair Holding sat and practiced the new abilities he'd discovered. Most of it was concerned with his telekinetic powers. He picked up objects and sent them hurtling through the air. He stopped them in mid-air, shot them around corners, sent three objects in different directions at once. When he was handling them with ease, he sat across the room from Caristia and they batted things back and forth at each other.

Then he learned to pick up her surface thoughts without losing himself in trying to probe deeper. After that she taught him how to use his mind-shield. He made the least progress with this, but did manage to ward off mental blows and to conceal some of his deeper thoughts.

Then she made him try all of them at once. He succeeded in keeping a half dozen objects darting back and forth be-

tween them, while he repeated a poem she was thinking, and worked out a minor chess problem which she failed to get. He was feeling pretty good about it when suddenly a book cracked his shin, a pillow smacked him full in the face, and he felt the lamp brush his hair.

"King's Knight to the Queen's Rook four for a mate," Caristia said.

Jair was crestfallen. "I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I'll never get the hang of it."

"You're doing wonderfully," Caristia said, "but you musn't make the mistake of feeling smug about it. You're on a planet where everyone can do most of these things, and the minute you waste time thinking you're pretty good you lose any little advantage you may have."

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"That's all for now," Caristia said. She grew silent for a moment, seeming to be almost in a trance. "They haven't found us yet. But Orcus has already thought of my idea. He has squads of Thought Police beaming on every room in Niketa. The nearest one is about two blocks away. Let's go."

They left the apartment and started down the stairs.

"Where are we going?" Jair asked.

"To the Crime Syndicate building," she said. "One more thing, Jair—you can use your mind shield enough to protect you against the worst of any mind-blast, but as yet you can't do more than that with it. I'll have to protect us on the street."

"Won't they recognize us? They're covering the whole city."

"Only mentally. And you must remember that telepaths don't examine faces the way you do on Terra; they look for the familiar mind pattern instead of the familiar features. I'm going to throw two mind patterns around us—it'll be that of a man and woman who are very much in love and are just taking a walk. All you have to do is be careful not to have any strong thoughts which may seep through the pattern I'm setting up."

He nodded. She took one of his hands as they stepped out on the street and they walked along in silence.

AT FIRST, Jair concentrated on thinking about the pattern she'd said she was setting up. Then he slowly became aware that he did enjoy holding hands with her, that it was pleasant just to walk along the street with her. It was no struggle to keep his mind off other things.

The towering Crime Syndicate building loomed up before them and they turned into the street that ran along the side of the building. Half way down the street they stopped. Caristia turned and came into his arms.

Jair was aware of a number of things on different levels. More immediately he was aware of her warmth, of the pressure of her body against his. But he was also aware of the air-car that was passing overhead, and he felt the brief impact of searching thoughts. Then the air-car was gone and the street was empty.

"Close your eyes again," she whispered.

"Why?" he whispered back.

"There are still too many things which are strange to you and any unconscious resistance on your part will put a further drain on my strength. Close your eyes."

This time he obeyed. Once more he felt his body lurch and a sensation as though a small wind had sprung up. This time it lasted only seconds until he again felt the pressure against his feet. He opened his eyes and saw that they were standing in an office. Directly before him was a girl seated at a desk, a startled look just forming in her eyes. But even as he stared at her, she crumpled over the desk. He swung his gaze to Caristia.

"No," she said in answer to his unspoken question, "she isn't dead. We have never used our power to kill, not even a Nikean. She'll merely be unconscious for several hours."

Jair stared at the office. There was something familiar about it and after a moment he realized it was the office from which he had made the visiphone call the night before. The office which was next to that of Orcus. He felt a touch of fear.

"Orcus is in there," Caristia said, nodding toward the connecting door. "But don't worry about it. He won't know we're here."

"You're still shielding us?" Jair asked.

"No." She smiled at his thoughts. "This office and the one in which Orcus sits are blanked off from the outside and from each other."

"I thought Nikeans didn't have mind shields."

"They don't, but there are mechanical ways of setting up barriers. These walls contain ultrasonic vibrations, with a frequency of twenty-five thousand cycles. These are the only rooms so shielded on the entire planet and most Nikeans don't even know that ultrasonics can be used. But no Nikean can penetrate these walls, not even Orcus."

"And you?"

"I can," she said soberly. "It isn't pleasant, but I can get through the barrier."

"Isn't there a chance that Orcus will come in here?"

"Not immediately. This girl is his secretary and she was making a check of operations. He won't expect her to be finished for some time."

"What if he wants her?"

"If he does, he'll have to cut off the ultrasonic and project to her. If he does that I'll try to blank you off and imitate the thought patterns of the girl before he can catch it. I think I can do do it fast enough."

"And if you can't?"

"We'll fight our way out," she said coolly. She moved around behind the desk and glanced down. "Come here, Jair. I heard the officer telling you that Nikeans have started building machinery to supplement their powers. Here is one of their most recent and cleverest."

HE STEPPED around the desk and stood beside her. The visiscreen was lighted up and on it was a view of giant steel girders rearing against a skyline. He could see tiny figures moving along the girders. As he watched, one central girder buckled in the center. Others toppled with it, spilling little figures as they went.

"Rigel," Caristia said. "This machine is reproducing here on the screen what a Nikean operator is actually seeing wherever he is."

"What's the point, since they can listen in on his thoughts anyway?" Jair asked.

"Higher efficiency. You have met Nikeans who are, relatively, high level telepaths. The majority of the Nikeans are less intelligent. They may see many things about which they do not think. This way, Orcus can check operations and often correct something which might go wrong. Let's try Terra." She turned a dial and the scene on the screen changed. The new one was inside a huge Terran auditorium where an opera was being performed.

"That operator must be taking the day off," she said. "I'm hoping that we can catch the beginning of a Terran operation, early enough for our purpose."

"What is our purpose?" Jair asked with a grin.

"When you call Benson to report to him, he isn't going to believe you. We need something that we can report—and that he can witness for himself." She punched a button near the dial and the scene swiftly changed to an open arena where a sporting event was being held.

After they had looked upon a dozen similar scenes, Caristia looked up, frowning. "There shouldn't be so many operators acting as if they're on a holiday," she said. "There must be something special being planned for Terra. Wait a minute. . . ."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. He felt her wince once and guessed that was when she went through the ultra-

sonic barrier. When she opened her eyes a few seconds later her face was pale.

"Orcus is smarter than I thought," she said.

"What's happening?' Jair asked.

"Orcus has set a trap for you," she said. "It's a trap for me too. He has every Terran operator in some place where there are thousands of Terrans gathered. Unless you surrender within thirty minutes and I leave Nike, one of those places will go up in flames. They will continue to destroy these public places at regular intervals until you do surrender. We can't go through with the plan of contacting Benson and letting the Federation handle it. We can't let all those people be killed. It would take too long for the Federation to act."

"Couldn't you get through to Orcus?" Jair asked.

"Yes, but I can't kill him either," she said. "And it would do no good just to knock him out. The orders will go through even if he doesn't contact the operators again."

Jair had a mental image of Orcus, and he could feel his hatred reaching out for the scar-faced Nikean.

"Maybe you can't kill him," he said grimly, "but I can. Maybe not mentally," he added as he saw her look at him, "but there are other ways. For once, I wish I'd gotten in the habit of carrying a weapon."

"There's an energy gun in the desk drawer," Caristia said, "but killing Orcus will not stop his plan."

"I've got an idea about that too," Jair said. He pulled open the desk drawer and saw the gun. He picked it up and hefted it in his hand. "Is Orcus in mental contact with anyone?"

"Yes. He has one ultrasonic wall down and is sending out the thought of his plan over and over. He knows that sooner or later we were bound to beam on him."

"You said that you can imitate the thought patterns of anyone. Can you imitate Orcus?"

"Yes." She saw what he was thinking. "I'll block him off the minute he sees you and continue the thoughts he's sending out."

"Good." Somewhat to his own surprise, Jair obeyed an impulse; he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Wish me luck, Caristia."

HOLDING the energy gun lightly in his right hand, he went to the connecting door and opened it softly. He stepped inside and closed the door gently. He'd taken another step before Orcus looked around.

"I've been expecting you," Orcus said quietly. Even as he spoke, he struck. Jair felt the first twinge of pain inside his head, but he gathered his strength and pushed back and the pain was gone. He raised the gun and tightened his finger.

"You've learned a lot," Orcus said. Again, he made his move while he was talking and this time he was successful . . . the energy gun leaped from Jair's hand. It stopped just out of reach and slowly began turning.

Jair applied the force of his mind and the gun wavered. For a moment, the two of them strained, mind against mind, and the barrel of the gun swung first one way and then the other.

Then for a moment, Jair relaxed, quickly applied force the other way. The gun spun in the air. Even while it was spinning, Jair withdrew, then slapped all the force he could muster on top of the gun. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

A chair came spinning through the air from the other side of the room. Instead of meeting it mid-way, Jair ducked, letting it sail over his head. At the same time, he pushed and the visiphone leaped at Orcus.

When Jair straightened up again, the energy gun was once more in his hand and he pulled the trigger as he came up. Smoke curled up from the desk as a path burned across the wood on its way to Orcus. The scar-faced Nikean slumped across the broken desk. The

visiphone crashed almost at Jair's feet. The smell of burned flesh mingled with that of burned wood.

After a time, the strength returned to Jair's legs. He tossed the gun to the floor and walked into the other room. Caristia was leaning back in the chair, looking relaxed.

"Can you continue imitating Orcus' thoughts and talk?" he asked.

"Of course," she said lightly. "I can even do it and read your thoughts." She must have done it for her expression changed. "Poor darling," she said. "Was it that bad?"

He nodded. "I hated Orcus, but I still didn't like killing him. I guess I was never cut out to be a hero."

"There are other kinds of heroes—at least on Pax." She looked up at him. "There isn't too much time, you know."

"I know," he said. "Do the operators on Terra take orders only from Orcus?"

"There are key men spotted through the Federation, but all of them are directly under the authority of Orcus. Or were."

He ignored the past tense. "Would Orcus ever contact them all together—hold a sort of telepathic conference, as it were?"

SHE NODDED. "What's your plan?" she asked. "Tell me—or think it in detail—and maybe I can help."

"I want some way of making every operator on Terra go into a recognizable trance, or something like it . . . it would be even better if we could make them stand up or salute or something. I'm going to convince Benson of what's going on and have him send out the galactic police to pick up every operator. They could carry supersonic devices as weapons. Benson has enough influence to swing it before the half hour is up."

"There's a better way," Caristia said. "First, how do you intend to convince Benson?"

"Can you keep up the impersonation of Orcus and read a mind on Terra at the same time?" he countered.

"Yes."

"Then you'll read Benson's mind. That'll upset him enough so he'll believe it. What's your better plan?"

"As soon as you've convinced Benson, I'll order all the operators to hold off for another thirty minutes. In the meantime, while you're talking to Benson, you'll insist that he also arrange for a Captain Merton to be in charge of the raiding party. Wait a minute—" She was silent for a minute. "Yes, he's on Terra. He'll be expecting his orders. He should be put in charge of rounding up the Nikeans throughout the galaxy."

"Who's Merton?"

"A Paxian. He'll be able to recognize the Nikeans and blank out their powers."

"Good." Jair swung the visiphone around and put in his call. Within a few minutes, Benson appeared on the screen.

"I was hoping I'd hear from you," he said. "How did that Paxian trip work out?"

"It didn't," Jair said. "But I've got the whole story for you. The Nikeans are telepaths, and this is the secret of their success throughout the galaxy."

Benson looked startled, but then his face smoothed out. "Nonsense," he said briskly. "There is no such thing as telepathic ability. If that's all you have to offer, Holding—"

"Wait a minute," Jair interrupted. "I wouldn't be giving you this information except for the help that I've had from a telepath. She's here with me now, and she's going to tell you what you thought about when I told you this."

He motioned quickly to Caristia, for Benson looked like a man who was about to break the connection.

"Mr. Benson," Caristia said, "first thought that you were drunk, then his next thought was that you had either been drugged or bribed by the Nikeans. With that, he determined to fire you and to hire a Martian Observer, named Rhamu, who was recommended to him this afternoon by his brother-in-law.

Then he hoped that you'd end the conversation because there's a lady waiting to see him. She's the wife of one of his friends and he—"

"That's enough," Benson shouted from the screen. "Don't say any more—especially on an interplanetary hookup. I believe you. How did she do that?"

"I told you—telepathy," Jair said. "Adjust your screen, Benson, so we can see your desk."

THERE was an adjustment and they could see the desk. It was clean and neat with only a few pencils and a paperweight on top of it.

"Watch your paperweight, Benson," Jair said. "All right, Caristia."

The paperweight took off, circled the office and came back to a gentle landing in front of Benson.

"Are you really convinced now, Benson?"

Benson's eyes were popping. "Yes, yes! But, good heavens, Holding, if what you say is true, what are we going to do?"

"It's worse than you think," Jair said. He quickly outlined the powers of the Nikeans and told Benson of the operators waiting on Terra at that moment. He then described his plan and how it was to work. He saw from a glance at Caristia that Benson was believing it.

"What's the man's name again—Merton? Where is he stationed now?"

Jair glanced at Caristia. "Nyork," she said.

Benson nodded. "What's so special about him?" he asked curiously.

"It's just that we believe he'll have the best chance against them," Jair said smoothly. He knew the Paxian's identity shouldn't be revealed. "When he's finished on Terra, Captain Merton should be put in charge of hunting down the Nikeans on other planets."

"I'll do it," Benson said. "But what the devil are we going to do about the future? How can we protect ourselves against people like that . . . unless—" a happier expression came over his face —"we get the Federation to declare war against them and wipe the whole bunch out of existence. By rights we ought to—they're definitely a menace."

"I don't think I'd try that, Benson," Jair said. He looked at the president of A. G. I. with distaste. "Don't forget that these people can reach out in space and destroy any armada you send against them—they can use their mental energy to touch off the explosives on the ships long before you get within striking distance of them."

There was a desperate look on Benson's face. "But what will we do? We can't just turn over the galaxy to them."

"In the long run, you and the Nikeans will have to work out some way of getting along without fighting," Jair said. "But for short-term protection, you can throw belts of ultrasonic waves around every planet in the galaxy. Twenty-five thousand cycles will do it. The Nikeans will be unable to penetrate the belt mentally."

He hadn't looked at Caristia, but he knew she approved.

"Is that the truth?" Benson asked. He looked relieved. "We can do that easily enough. You're sure that'll protect us?"

"For a while," Jair said. "Once their mental powers are limited, the Nikeans will be sure eventually to build regular space ships. When that time comes, they'll be able to fly through the ultrasonics and then they can use their mental powers again. But it'll give both of you time to think about some way to get along. Now get to work on the raids, Benson."

He reached up and deliberately snapped the connection.

XIV

HE WAS quiet while Caristia sent mental orders winging through space to Terra. And they waited some more. Caristia whispered the news when the first raid came off.

Two hours later, the last raid was

pulled and they knew that every Nikean on Terra was in the custody of Captain Merton.

"The ultrasonic switches are on Orcus' desk," Caristia said. "Go and close the one open wall. Then we can leave. It will give us some time before they discover that Orcus is dead."

He walked into the next office and went to the desk, without looking at the body sprawled across it. He found the switches, figured out which one was open and closed it. He went back to Caristia.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now, we get out of here without being seen," she said with a smile.

"This time with my eyes open," Jair said.

She nodded and took his hand. They turned and faced the wall.

Even though he had a vague idea of what had happened before, he was startled when they both left the floor and sped right at the wall. By exerting all of his will power, he managed not to flinch when they reached the wall. He felt nothing, but there was a moment of thick grayness before his eyes and then they were high above the city. Straight up they arrowed, with a speed that made him dizzy. Then—and he knew they must have reached a level above that on which the air-cars operated—they sped off over the city. Slowly the fear left him and he gloried in the wingless flight.

She set them down in a deserted field far from the city. She turned to face him and he knew that in some way this was an important moment. He had known that something like it was coming, for Caristia's mind-shield had been tightly closed since the moment when they had finished back in the office.

He was a little afraid of the unknown and wanted to put it off. "Tell me," he said, "what Pax is like."

"Pax," she said with a gentle smile, "is like home—what else can I say? It is like no other planet in the universe, yet it is not different from what other planets might be."

"Industry?" he asked.

"Everyone on Pax is industrious, but there is no industry as you call it. What is needed is produced and is consumed or used. That is our industry."

"Government?"

"I suppose you might call it an empire, at first glance," she said. "We have an Empress, but she was elected because of certain abilities. Her children—if she ever marries and has children—will inherit only the things her body can give them."

He was quiet for a minute, and it was she who next spoke.

"Jair," she said.

He looked at her and knew that the moment—whatever it carried—had arrived.

"I told you before that throughout the centuries there have been a few who developed their latent powers—just as you have started to develop yours. And I told you that some of these then left their home planet, while some remained and lost their ability. This choice is now yours."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You can come to Pax to live for the rest of your life. Or, if you prefer, you may return to Terra."

"And if I choose to return to Terra?"

"Then you must forget the ability you have. You must submit to an erasure. It is not painful; you wouldn't even feel it. But those synapses which carry the memory of your ability, of how to exercise it, must be erased."

HE HAD asked only out of curiosity. He still could remember the horror he'd experienced earlier, and he knew there was still fear in him of living through something like that again; but there was no doubt in his mind. He was honest with himself. It was only partly the dark girl who stood beside him, although she had become an important part in the few hours he'd known her. The few glimpses into her mind had made him sure that he knew

her as he'd never known anyone before. But there were other reasons. He'd only touched the surface of his mental powers, but he sensed there was a fulfillment and a freedom there that he'd never dared imagine.

She knew the answer before he spoke, but he said it anyway: "Pax."

Though she still didn't relax her mind-shield, he sensed that she was pleased. He refused to believe this was only wishful thinking.

"How do we go?" he asked. "The same way we came here?"

"No," she said. "I'm afraid it would overtax my strength to teleport both of us that far. You have learned much in one day, but your knowledge is not enough to try that yet. I'm bringing a ship here."

"Operated by mental energy?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What about the force field around Pax?"

"It's a mental force field. You will be recognized and permitted through."

"*I* will be recognized?"

"I'm going ahead," she said. "The ship will bring you straight to Pax."

"When you—teleport through space," Jair asked, "don't you need a space suit, or some protection?"

"Some protection, yes . . . I'll create a force field around my body. You'll be able to do it in time."

They talked no more until the ship came to settle silently beside them. Jair stopped, with one foot in the air-lock and looked questioningly at her. "Will I see you there?" he asked.

"If you want to."

"Caristia," Jair said, trying once more. "Have you looked deeply into my mind?"

She looked at him without answering.

"Why is your mind shield still up?" he went on doggedly.

"On Pax," she said. She smiled once, and then her body arched and she went swiftly up into the air. He watched as she dwindled out of sight.

He stepped into the ship. The air-lock closed and the ship took to the air.

Once, when he was high above the planet, he thought of the million credits that waited for him back on Terra. But his only thought was one of amusement as he envisioned future generations of bankers worrying over the missing depositor and his missing heirs, embarrassed by an account and no one to whom they could render an accounting. Unless, Terra, some time in the future, learned to distinguish between credits and credit.

THE SHIP came down at the edge of the city that stretched through a green valley. It was not large, as cities went throughout the galaxy. It followed the contours of the valley, looking as though it belonged there rather than something which had been forced between the hills without ceremony. The lines of the buildings were curved and flowing, a brighter continuation of the rolling fields beyond.

The ship lifted into the air and was gone.

The street was broad and smooth, moving at a steady pace into the city. He stepped onto it and was carried along. As he neared the city, others stepped upon the street and went along with him. Some of them brought work with them, while others came bare-handed.

There was a man who stepped upon the street carrying a smooth, rounded stone. He fixed his eyes on it and, as Jair watched, the stone lost its rounded lines, seemed to melt and flow in the man's hands, then reared into a new shape. When it was again solid, it was a tiny maiden, standing tiptoe upon a small green ball. It seemed to Jair that it looked like Caristia. The man held it up and smiled at Jair.

There was a girl who stepped upon the street, carrying a stringed instrument against her generous hip. The strings plucked themselves and the strange music filled the air.

More and more people joined them on the moving street, the men and the women and the children.

Welcome to Pax.

It was like a giant thought reaching out to enfold him, and he knew that it came from all of them. There was an acceptance to it such as he'd never known—perhaps because it was a thought, instead of words which could conceal as well as reveal; perhaps because he could feel the thought and knew that it contained nothing but the acceptance.

As the street moved, he looked among the people and looked in vain. The women and the men and the children were all beautiful, but nowhere did he see the special beauty he sought.

I am here.

It was her thought. He could have made no mistake about that. He began, slowly, to realize why it was so different from the others.

Where? he thought.

Straight ahead. You are coming to me.

Funny, he thought privately to himself, when you give up speech there are some words which don't even have to be thought.

Oh, yes.

He became aware of something else. The minute her thought had come to him, the other thoughts had ceased to be.

He realized that they had somehow turned their thoughts away—giving him the privacy he'd been sure was missing entirely on this planet.

The street curved with the valley, then carried them swiftly toward the hills.

He wondered briefly why they were all riding on the swift street when they could fly as they willed. Then he knew—and was not sure if the thought had been winged to him—that this was something they were doing for him so that he might not go through the city alone.

High on the hill there was a great circle of seats and in the center there were two towering chairs. She stood in front of one of the chairs. The white ceremonial robe clung to her body and the single bright stone was like a star in the blackness of her hair.

Jair Holding left the street and walked on the soft grass.

Her mind opened to him and he lived for a moment in its beauty and tenderness. When he withdrew, he knew that it would never be closed to him. And in turn he felt the soft brush of her mind within his and knew that he would never again be alone.

Beloved. It was a single thought between them.

Then the minds around them opened, and the thought filled the valley like joyful thunder:

Do you, Jair Holding, become one with Empress Caristia? . . .

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

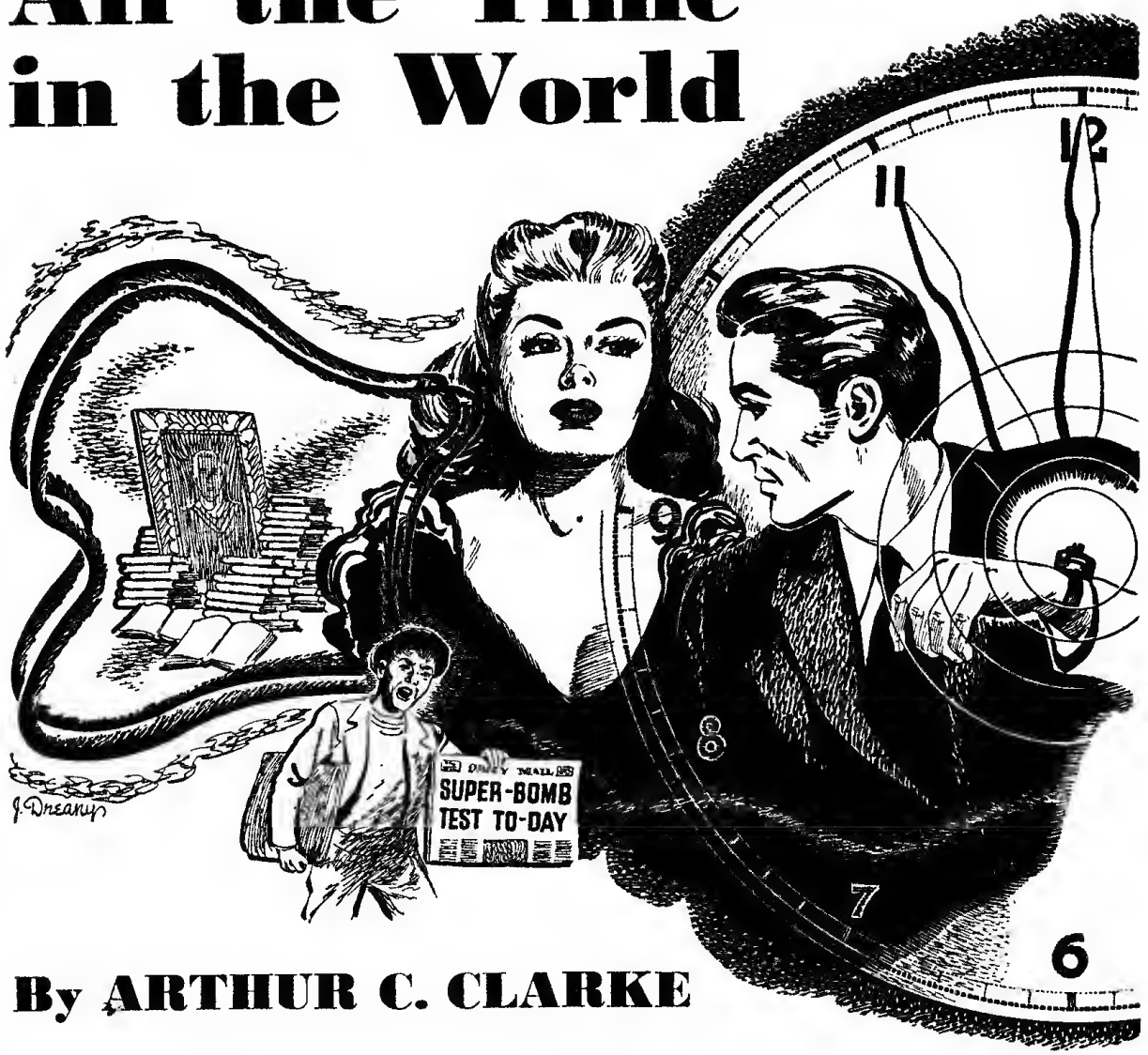
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All the Time in the World



By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

WHEN THE quiet knock came on the door, Robert Ashton surveyed the room in one swift, automatic movement. Its dull respectability satisfied him and should reassure any visitor. Not that he had any reason to expect the police, but there was no point in taking chances.

"Come in," he said, pausing only to grab Plato's *Dialogues* from the shelf beside him. Perhaps this gesture was a little too ostentatious, but it always impressed his clients.

The door opened slowly. At first Ashton continued his intent reading, not bothering to glance up. There was the slightest acceleration of his heart, a mild and even exhilarating constriction of the chest. Of course, it couldn't possibly be a flatfoot: someone would have tipped him off. Still, any unheralded visitor was unusual and thus potentially dangerous.

Robert Ashton faced the most agonizing choice in the history of man—a choice in which he could only lose!

Ashton laid down the book, glanced towards the door and remarked in a noncommittal voice: "What can I do for you?" He did not get up; such courtesies belonged to a past he had buried long ago. Besides, it was a woman. In the circles he now frequented, women were accustomed to receive jewels and clothes and money—but never respect.

Yet there was something about this visitor that drew him slowly to his feet. It was not merely that she was beautiful, but she had a poised and effortless authority that moved her into a different world from the flamboyant doxies he met in the normal course of business. There was a brain and a purpose behind those calm, appraising eyes—a brain, Ashton suspected, the equal of his own.

He did not know how grossly he had underestimated her.

"Mr. Ashton," she began, "let us not waste time. I know who you are and I have work for you. Here are my credentials."

She opened a large, stylish handbag and extracted a thick bundle of notes.

"You may regard this," she said, "as a sample."

Ashton caught the bundle as she tossed it carelessly towards him. It was the largest sum of money he had ever held in his life—at least a hundred fivers, all new and serially numbered. He felt them between his fingers. If they were not genuine, they were so good that the difference was of no practical importance.

He ran his thumb to and fro along the edge of the wad as if feeling a pack for a marked card, and said thoughtfully, "I'd like to know where you got these. If they aren't forgeries, they must be hot and will take some passing."

"They are genuine. A very short time ago they were in the Bank of England. But if they are no use to you throw them in the fire. I merely let you have them to show that I mean business."

"Go on." He gestured to the only seat and balanced himself on the edge of the table.

She drew a sheaf of papers from the capacious handbag and handed it across to him.

"I am prepared to pay you any sum you wish if you will secure these items and bring them to me, at a time and place to be arranged. What is more, I will guarantee that you can make the thefts with no personal danger."

ASHTON looked at the list, and sighed. The woman was mad. Still, she had better be humoured. There might be more money where this came from.

"I notice," he said mildly, "that all these items are in the British Museum, and that most of them are, quite literally, priceless. By that I mean that you could neither buy nor sell them."

"I do not wish to sell them. I am a collector."

"So it seems. What are you prepared to pay for these acquisitions?"

"Name a figure."

There was a short silence. Ashton weighed the possibilities. He took a certain professional pride in his work, but there were some things that no amount of money could accomplish. Still, it would be amusing to see how high the bidding would go.

He looked at the list again.

"I think a round million would be a very reasonable figure for this lot," he said ironically.

"I fear you are not taking me very seriously. With your contacts, you should be able to dispose of these."

There was a flash of light and something sparkled through the air. Ashton caught the necklace before it hit the ground, and despite himself was unable to suppress a gasp of amazement. A fortune glittered through his fingers. The central diamond was the largest he had ever seen—it must be one of the world's most famous jewels.

His visitor seemed completely indifferent as he slipped the necklace into his pocket. Ashton was badly shaken; he knew she was not acting. To her, that fabulous gem was of no more value than

a lump of sugar. This was madness on an unimaginable scale.

"Assuming that you can deliver the money," he said, "how do you imagine that it's physically possible to do what you ask? One might steal a single item from this list, but within a few hours the Museum would be solid with police."

With a fortune already in his pocket, he could afford to be frank. Besides, he was curious to learn more about his fantastic visitor.

She smiled, rather sadly, as if humouring a backward child.

"If I show you the way," she said softly, "will you do it?"

"Yes—for a million."

"Have you noticed anything strange since I came in? Is it not—very quiet?"

Ashton listened. My God, she was right! This room was never completely silent, even at night. There had been a wind blowing over the rooftops; where had it gone now? The distant rumble of traffic had ceased; five minutes ago he had been cursing the engines shunting in the marshalling yard at the end of the road. What had happened to them?

"Go to the window."

He obeyed the order and drew aside the grimy lace curtains with fingers that shook slightly despite all attempt at control. Then he relaxed. The street was quite empty, as it often was at this time in the mid-morning. There was no traffic, and hence no reason for sound. Then he glanced down the row of dingy houses towards the shunting yard.

His visitor smiled as he stiffened with the shock.

"Tell me what you see, Mr. Ashton."

He turned slowly, face pale and throat muscles working.

"What are you?" he gasped. "A witch?"

"Don't be foolish. There is a simple explanation. It is not the world that has changed—but you."

Ashton stared again at that unbelievable shunting engine, the plume of steam frozen motionless above it as if made from cotton wool. He realised now that the clouds were equally immobile; they should have been scudding across the sky. All around him was the unnatural stillness of the high-speed photograph, the vivid unreality of a scene glimpsed in a flash of lightning.

"You are intelligent enough to realise what is happening, even if you cannot understand how it is done. Your time-scale has been altered: a minute in the outer world would be a year in this room."

Again she opened the handbag, and this time brought forth what appeared to be a bracelet of some silvery metal, with a series of dials and switches moulded into it.

"You can call this a personal generator," she said. "With it strapped about your arm, you are invincible. You can come and go without hindrance—you can steal everything on that list and bring it to me before one of the guards in the Museum has blinked an eyelid. When you have finished, you can be miles away before you switch off the field and step back into the normal world.

"Now listen carefully, and do exactly what I say. The field has a radius of about seven feet, so you must keep at least that distance from any other person. Secondly, you must not switch it off again until you have completed your task and I have given you your payment. *This is most important.* Now, the plan I have worked out is this. . . ."

NO CRIMINAL in the history of the world had ever possessed such power. It was intoxicating—yet Ashton wondered if he would ever get used to it. He had ceased to worry about explanations, at least until the job was done and he had collected his reward. Then, perhaps, he would get away from England and enjoy a well-earned retirement.

His visitor had left a few minutes ahead of him, but when he stepped out into the street the scene was completely unchanged. Though he had prepared for it, the sensation was still unnerving.

Ashton felt an impulse to hurry, as if this condition couldn't possibly last and he had to get the job done before the gadget ran out of juice. But that, he had been assured, was impossible.

In the High Street he slowed down to look at the frozen traffic, the paralyzed pedestrians. He was careful, as he had been warned, not to approach so close to anyone that they came within his field. How ridiculous people looked when one saw them like this, robbed of such grace as movement could give, their mouths half-open in foolish grimaces!

Having to seek assistance went against the grain, but some parts of the job were too big for him to handle by himself. Besides, he could pay liberally and never notice it. The main difficulty, Ashton realised, would be to find someone who was intelligent enough not to be scared—or so stupid that he would take everything for granted. He decided to try the first possibility.

Tony Marchetti's place was down a side street so close to the police station that one felt it was really carrying camouflage too far. As he walked past the entrance, Ashton caught a glimpse of the duty sergeant at his desk and resisted a temptation to go inside to combine a little pleasure with business. That sort of thing could wait until later.

The door of Tony's opened in his face as he approached. It was such a natural occurrence in a world where nothing was normal that it was a moment before Ashton realised its implications. Had his generator failed? He glanced hastily down the street and was reassured by the frozen tableau behind him.

"Well, if it isn't Bob Ashton!" said a familiar voice. "Fancy meeting you as early in the morning as this. That's an odd bracelet you're wearing. I thought I had the only one."

"Hello, Aram," replied Ashton. "It looks as if there's a lot going on that neither of us knows about. Have you signed up Tony, or is he still free?"

"Sorry. We've a little job which will keep him busy for a while."

"Don't tell me. It's at the National Gallery or the Tate."

Aram Albenkian fingered his neat goatee. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"No one. But, after all, you *are* the crookedest art dealer in the trade, and I'm beginning to guess what's going on. Did a tall, very good-looking brunette give you that bracelet and a shopping list?"

"I don't see what I should tell you, but the answer's no. It was a man."

Ashton felt a momentary surprise. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "I might have guessed that there would be more than one of them. I'd like to know who's behind it."

"Have you any theories?" said Albenkian guardedly.

Ashton decided that it would be worth risking some loss of information to test the other's reactions. "It's obvious they're not interested in money—they have all they want and can get more with this gadget. The woman who saw me said she was a collector. I took it as a joke, but I see now that she meant it seriously."

"Why do we come into the picture? What's to stop them doing the whole job themselves?" Albenkian asked.

"Maybe they're frightened. Or perhaps they want our—er—specialized knowledge. Some of the items on my list are rather well cased in. My theory is that they're agents for a mad millionaire."

It didn't hold water, and Ashton knew it. But he wanted to see which leaks Albenkian would try to plug.

"My dear Ashton," said the other impatiently, holding up his wrist. "How do you explain this little thing? I know nothing about science, but even I can tell that it's beyond the wildest dreams of our technologies. There's only one conclusion to be drawn from that."

"Go on."

"These people are from—somewhere else. Our world is being systematically looted of its treasures. You know all this stuff you read about rockets and space-

ships? Well, someone else has done it first."

Ashton didn't laugh. The theory was no more fantastic than the facts.

"Whoever they are," he said, "they seem to know their way around pretty well. I wonder how many teams they've got? Perhaps the Louvre and the Prado are being reconnoitered at this very minute. The world is going to have a shock before the day's out."

They parted amicably enough, neither confiding any details of real importance about his business. For a fleeting moment Ashton thought of trying to buy over Tony, but there was no point in antagonizing Albenkian. Steven Regan would have to do. That meant walking about a mile, since of course any form of transport was impossible. He would die of old age before a bus completed the journey. Ashton was not clear what would happen if he attempted to drive a car when the field was operating, and he had been warned not to try any experiments.

IT ASTONISHED Ashton that even such a nearly certifiable moron as Steve could take the accelerator so calmly; there was something to be said, after all, for the comic strips which were probably his only reading. After a few words of grossly simplified explanation, Steve buckled on the spare wristlet which, rather to Ashton's surprise, his visitor had handed over without comment. Then they set out on their long walk to the Museum.

Ashton, or his client, had thought of everything. They stopped once at a park bench to rest and enjoy some sandwiches and regain their breath. When at last they reached the Museum, neither felt any the worse for the unaccustomed exercise.

They walked together through the gates of the Museum—unable, despite logic, to avoid speaking in whispers—and up the wide stone steps into the entrance hall. Ashton knew his way perfectly. With whimsical humour he displayed his Reading Room ticket as they walked, at a respectful distance, past the statuesque attendants. It occurred to him that the occupants of the great chamber, for the most part, looked just the same as they normally did, even without the benefit of the accelerator.

It was a straightforward but tedious job collecting the books that had been listed. They had been chosen, it seemed, for their beauty as works of art as much as their literary contents. The selection had been done by someone who knew his job. Had *they* done it themselves, Ashton wondered, or had they bribed other experts as they were bribing him? He wondered if he would ever glimpse the full ramifications of their plot.

There was a considerable amount of panel-smashing to be done, but Ashton was careful not to damage any books, even the unwanted ones. Whenever he had collected enough volumes to make a comfortable load, Steve carried them out into the courtyard and dumped them on the paving stones until a small pyramid had accumulated.

It would not matter if they were left for short periods outside the field of the accelerator. No one would notice their momentary flicker of existence in the normal world.

They were in the library for two hours of their time, and paused for another snack before passing to the next job. On the way Ashton stopped for a little private business. There was a tinkle of glass as the tiny case, standing in solitary splendor, yielded up its treasure: then the manuscript of "Alice" was safely tucked into Ashton's pocket.

Among the antiquities, he was not quite so much at home. There were a few examples to be taken from every gallery, and sometimes it was hard to see the reasons for the choice. It was as if—and again he remembered Albenkian's words—these works of art had been selected by someone with totally alien standards. This time, with a few exceptions, *they* had obviously not been

guided by the experts.

For the second time in history the case of the Portland Vase was shattered. In five seconds, thought Ashton, the alarms would be going all over the Museum and the whole building would be in an uproar. And in five seconds he could be miles away. It was an intoxicating thought, and as he worked swiftly to complete his contract he began to regret the price he had asked. Even now, it was not too late.

HE FELT the quiet satisfaction of the good workman as he watched Steve carry the great silver tray of the Mildenhall Treasure out into the courtyard and place it beside the now impressive pile. "That's the lot," he said. "I'll settle up at my place this evening. Now let's get this gadget off you."

They walked out into High Holborn and chose a secluded side street that had no pedestrians near it. Ashton unfastened the peculiar buckle and stepped back from his cohort, watching him freeze into immobility as he did so. Steve was vulnerable again, moving once more with all other men in the stream of time. But before the alarm had gone out he would have lost himself in the London crowds.

When he re-entered the Museum yard, the treasure had already gone. Standing where it had been was his visitor of—how long ago? She was still poised and graceful, but Ashton thought, looking a little tired. He approached until their fields merged and they were no longer separated by an impassable gulf of silence. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "How did you move the stuff so quickly?"

She touched the bracelet round her own wrist and gave a wan smile. "We have many other powers besides this."

"Then why did you need my help?"

"There were technical reasons. It was necessary to remove the objects we required from the presence of other matter. In this way, we could gather only what we needed and not waste our limited—what shall I call them?—transporting facilities. Now may I have the bracelet back?"

Ashton slowly handed over the one he was carrying, but made no effort to unfasten his own. There might be danger in what he was doing, but he intended to retreat at the first sign of it.

"I'm prepared to reduce my fee," he said. "In fact I'll waive all payment—in exchange for this." He touched his wrist, where the intricate metal band gleamed in the sunlight.

She was watching him with an expression as fathomless as the Gioconda smile. (Had *that*, Ashton wondered, gone to join the treasure he had gathered? How much had they taken from the Louvre?)

"I would not call that reducing your fee. All the money in the world could not purchase one of those bracelets."

"Or the things I have given you."

"You are greedy, Mr. Ashton. You know that with an accelerator the world would be yours."

"What of that? Do you have any further interest in our planet, now you have taken what you need?"

There was a pause. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled. "So you have guessed I do not belong to your world."

"Yes. And I know that you have other agents besides myself. Do you come from Mars, or won't you tell me?"

"I am quite willing to tell you. But you may not thank me if I do."

ASHTON looked at her warily. What did she mean by that? Unconscious of his action, he put his wrist behind his back, protecting the bracelet.

"No, I am not from Mars, or any planet of which you have ever heard. You would not understand *what* I am. Yet I will tell you this. I am from the Future."

"The Future! That's ridiculous!"

"Indeed? I should be interested to know why."

"If that sort of thing were possible, our past history would be full of time-

travellers. Besides, it would involve a *reductio ad absurdum*. Going into the past could change the present and produce all sorts of paradoxes."

"Those are good points, though not perhaps as original as you suppose. But they only refute the possibility of time-travel in general, not in the very special case which concerns us now."

"What is peculiar about it?"

"On very rare occasions, and by the release of an enormous amount of energy, it is possible to produce a—*singularity*—in time. During the fraction of a second when that singularity occurs, the past becomes accessible to the future, though only in a restricted way. We can send our minds back to you, but not our bodies."

"You mean," gasped Ashton, "that you are *borrowing* the body I see?"

"Oh, I have paid for it, as I am paying you. The owner has agreed to the terms. We are very conscientious in these matters."

Ashton was thinking swiftly. If this story was true, it gave him a definite advantage.

"You mean," he continued, "that you have no direct control over matter, and must work through human agents?"

"Yes. Even those bracelets were made here, under our mental control."

She was explaining too much too readily, revealing all her weaknesses. A warning signal was flashing in the back of Ashton's mind, but he had committed himself too deeply to retreat.

"Then it seems to me," he said slowly, "that you cannot force me to hand this bracelet back."

"That is perfectly true."

"That's all I want to know."

She was smiling at him now, and there was something in that smile that chilled him to the marrow.

"We are not vindictive or unkind, Mr. Ashton," she said quietly. "What I am going to do now appeals to my sense of justice. You have asked for that bracelet; you can keep it. Now I

[*Turn page*]



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shall tell you just how useful it will be."

For a moment Ashton had a wild impulse to hand back the accelerator. She must have guessed his thoughts.

"No, it's too late. I insist that you keep it. And I can reassure you on one point. It won't wear out. It will last you—" again that enigmatic smile—"the rest of your life.

"Do you mind if we go for a walk, Mr. Ashton? I have done my work here, and would like to have a last glimpse of your world before I leave it forever."

She turned towards the iron gates, and did not wait for a reply. Consumed by curiosity, Ashton followed.

THEY walked in silence until they were standing among the frozen traffic of Tottenham Court Road. For a while she stood staring at the busy yet motionless crowds; then she sighed.

"I cannot help feeling sorry for them, and for you. I wonder what you would have made of yourselves."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just now, Mr. Ashton, you implied that the future cannot reach back into the past, because that would alter history. A shrewd remark, but, I am afraid, irrelevant. You see, *your* world has no more history to alter."

She pointed across the road, and Ashton turned swiftly on his heels. There was nothing there except a newsboy crouching over his pile of papers. A placard formed an impossible curve in the breeze that was blowing through this motionless world. Ashton read the crudely lettered words with difficulty:

SUPER-BOMB TEST TODAY

The voice in his ears seemed to come from a very long way off.

"I told you that time-travel, even in this restricted form, requires an enormous release of energy—far more than a single bomb can liberate, Mr. Ashton. But that bomb is only a trigger—"

She pointed to the solid ground beneath their feet. "Do you know anything about your own planet? Probably not; your race has learned so little. But even your scientists have discovered that, two thousand miles down, the Earth has a dense, liquid core. That core is made of compressed matter, and it can exist in either of two stable states. Given a certain stimulus, it can change from one of those states to another, just as a see-saw can tip over at the touch of a finger. But that change, Mr. Ashton, will liberate as much energy as all the earthquakes since the beginning of your world. The oceans and continents will fly into space, the Sun will have a second asteroid belt.

"That cataclysm will send its echoes down the ages, and will open up to us a fraction of a second in your time. During that instant, we are trying to save what we can of your world's treasures. It is all that we can do; even if your motives were purely selfish and completely dishonest, you have done your race a service you never intended.

"And now I must return to our ship, where it waits by the ruins of Earth almost a hundred thousand years from now. You can keep the bracelet."

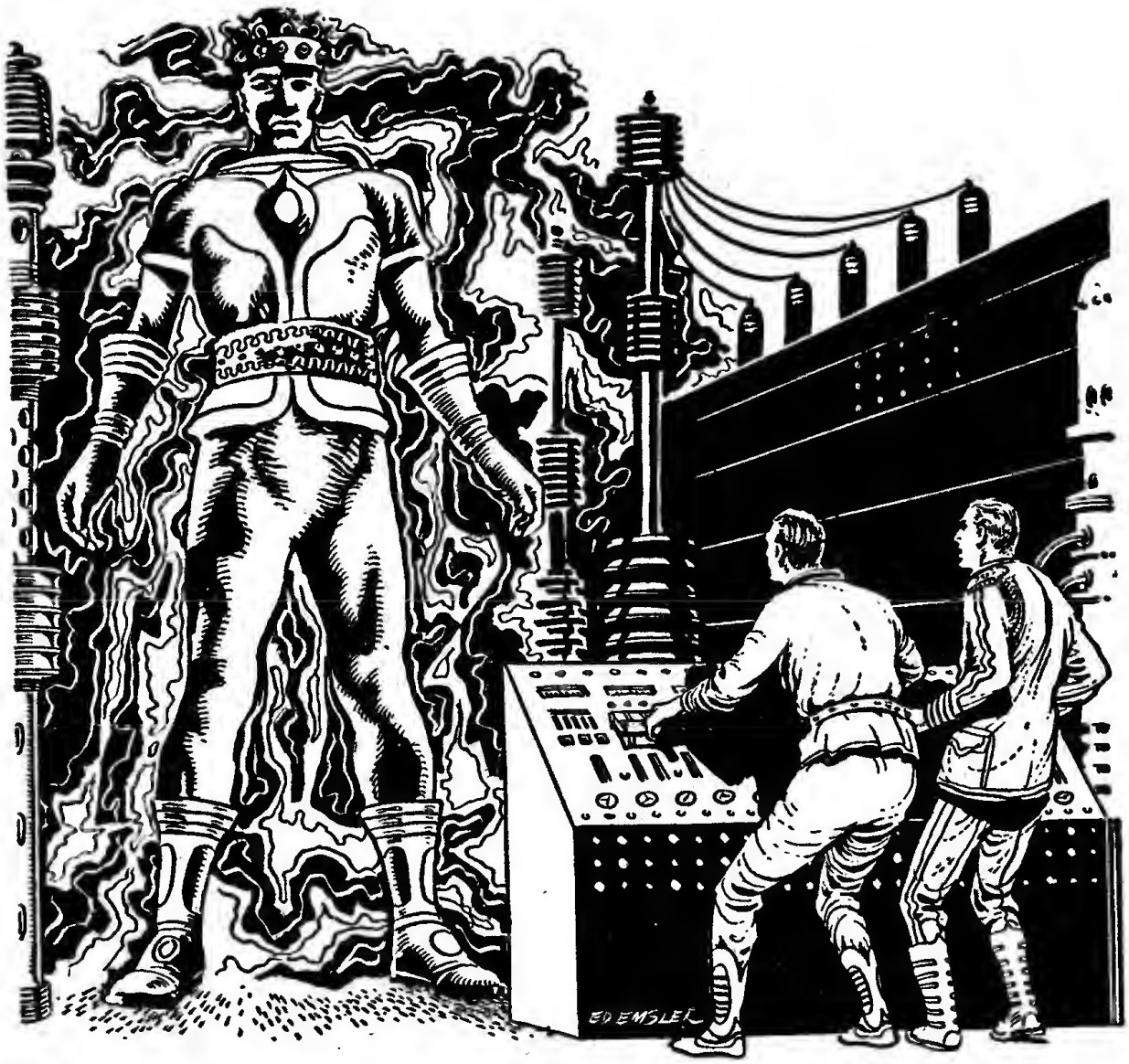
The withdrawal was instantaneous. The woman suddenly froze and became one with the other statues in the silent street. He was alone.

Alone! Ashton held the gleaming bracelet before his eyes, hypnotized by its intricate workmanship and by the powers it concealed. He had made a bargain, and he must keep it. He could live out the full span of his life—at the cost of an isolation no other man had ever known. If he switched off the field, the last seconds of history would tick inexorably away.

Seconds? Indeed, there was less time than that. For he knew that the bomb must already have exploded.

He sat down on the edge of the pavement and began to think. There was no need to panic; he must take things calmly, without hysteria. After all, he had plenty of time.

All the time in the world.



The face wavered, changing into a strange geometrical mass

NEW UNIVERSE

By WILLIAM MORRISON

THEY called him "Lord of the Universe," and he deserved the title. That should have been enough for any reasonable being. But no one who has ever been a Lord of anything is quite reasonable, and Zaron was least reasonable of all Lords. Like a less famous predecessor on one of the more insignif-

Zaron found a new universe to conquer—
but he couldn't come back to gloat. . . .

icant planets of a minor sun, he sighed for new worlds to conquer, or rather, new universes.

MacPalnar, who had been trained to loyalty from birth, realized that it was his duty to think of a way of satisfying so noble an ambition.

You mustn't suppose that MacPalnar's loyalty had anything mystic about it. MacPalner, in fact, could see most things well enough. The feeling of loyalty was something foreign that had been injected into his system, as into the system of every other subject. Loyalty to Zaron was the cement that held together a far-flung empire, that maintained law and order, that did this, that, and the other wonderful thing. At least, that was the official way of putting it. Therefore, loyalty was inculcated by conscious as well as by hypnotic indoctrination.

The whole thing was done with such efficiency and skill that even the psychologists who had devised the program couldn't escape it. They despised Zaron, but after being subjected to their own methods they were as loyal to him as was every one else. MacPalnar, who specialized in the mathematical and physical sciences, knew less about Zaron than some of his colleagues did, and therefore had a higher opinion of him. But even those of the Lord's weaknesses that he did see didn't prevent him from being loyal. And now there was this matter of seeking new universes.

Any one else would have thought the quest absurd and hopeless to start with. But MacPalnar had seen so many absurd and hopeless problems solved in unexpected ways that he tackled this one quite calmly.

First, though, he had to find out exactly what it was that had made Zaron express his little wish. As a member of the Army's Science Staff, he decided that the best person to tell him was General Ragnar, Chief of Intelligence. A brief message to the general, who was on another planet, informed the latter that MacPalnar would like a few moments of his time. The general, who had nothing on his mind but some highly important and dull Army business, replied that it would be a pleasure to speak to the scientist. So MacPalnar set his personal transporter with the proper coordinates, pressed the proper buttons, and a few seconds later found himself facing the general in the latter's own office.

With all space lying practically at his fingertips, the general found no great need of it in his office. His office was tiny, but extremely comfortable. When he felt like having privacy, he made the walls opaque. When he felt more sociable, he made them transparent, and looked through them to see what was going on in the territory under his jurisdiction.

AT THE moment he felt that he and MacPalnar might prefer privacy. MacPalnar agreed with him. After the usual formal greetings, he said, "I wonder, General, how far our Universe does extend. Have we really conquered it all?"

"All that matters." General Ragnar reached for a map button, and the side wall seemed to disappear. A panorama of stars and nebulae began to unroll itself before them. "Here," he said, "is our Universe. This is supposed to be top secret, but actually it doesn't matter too much. There is no enemy to take advantage of the knowledge."

"All the same, I shall breathe a word to no one. Loyalty requires silence," said MacPalnar.

General Ragnar nodded. "Of course. At any rate, everything we want to bother with is ours. The distance in light years doesn't matter, for as you know, we can get where we please in no time at all, using the fourth dimension. Do you follow me?"

"Without the slightest trouble."

"Frankly, MacPalnar, I can't follow myself. I don't claim to be a scientist, you know. I'm only a military man, and it's my job to know how to do things,

not to explain them. There's some vague analogy I remember from my student days, something about a sheet of paper—"

MacPalnar smiled. "Allow me to do the explaining," he said. "Let us suppose we were two-dimensional creatures, living on a sheet of paper that had no thickness, none at all, and that the sheet stretched infinitely in all directions. If we could travel only *on* the paper, then the further away a place was, the longer it would take us to get there. But suppose the sheet were rolled up, and we could travel *through* the paper. Then we could cut through light-years in seconds.

"That's analogous to the way the thing works. We live in three dimensions, not two. But by passing through a fourth dimension, we can give the effect of traveling much faster than light. Get it now?"

"Yes, thanks. Well, as I was saying, because of this method you've just explained, every star and every planet is quickly accessible to us. We've explored practically everything that seemed interesting. The planets without life have been of interest as sources of raw materials. Those with life have been important as additional homes of subjects of Zaron—and as possible enemies of the empire."

"I understand that some of them have been quite dangerous."

"A few put up strenuous opposition. But, and I think that this is the trouble, there were only a few. And they have been overcome. Now there's no danger that will keep Zaron interested."

MacPalnar said slowly, "I see. I rather pity him."

"Why? I'm as loyal as any one, MacPalnar, and I'd give my life to defend Zaron — I can't help myself, because that's bred into me—but I don't see anything to pity. My loyalty doesn't take away my clarity of vision. Just give me a chance to be in his place, that's all."

"Well, it's not his fault if he's stupid. He just happened to be at the head when the empire was consolidated. And he benefited."

"Did he? He'd be better off as an ordinary man. By all the curses of whatever hell there is, what sorry fate put us under such a halfwit Emperor? If only he could be overthrown, he'd be happier, and we'd all breathe easier."

"True enough," said MacPalnar. "But he can't be. And if any one tried to overthrow him, our carefully instilled loyalty would instantly force us to defend him. So would the loyalty of every man, woman, and child in the empire."

"How about the unintelligent creatures?" asked the general hopefully. "They don't have loyalty instilled into them. Do you think that they might accidentally—"

"I'm afraid there's no hope there, General, so let's not waste time thinking about it. We'll agree that the situation is unfortunate and that we all suffer conflicts between the common sense requirement to get rid of Zaron and our conditioned need to fight for him. Now, back to our problem. What new conquests can Zaron make that will rank as new universes?"

"None."

"Any galaxies unconquered? Any planets?"

NOTHING of any consequence. There'd be no resistance that we wouldn't quickly overcome. We might slaughter a few billion people, but Zaron is tired of even that amusement."

"How about personal attainments?"

"He has everything that he prizes. A few lifetimes ago he was made an immortal—the only one anywhere. In fact, that's his chief trouble. He's lived long enough to be bored.

"You can't get him interested in anything intellectual," continued the general flatly. "He has the mind of an eight-year-old child. Imagine him as the beneficiary of all the wonders of science—and lacking either the interest or the intelligence to understand them. It isn't the same in my case," the General add-

ed hastily. "I *like* science. It's just that I lack time to study it. However, as I meant to say, for a time he was interested in expanding."

"I know. When did that pall on him?"

"When he found that the more he expanded, the duller his sensations became. We made him almost as big as an average moon, but he didn't like it, and had to be reduced back to twice normal size. Some of your scientists pointed out that he could sharpen his sensations by contracting, but he thought it beneath his dignity to shrink, and refused to try it."

"How about taking other shapes?"

"The amusement has worn off that too. He didn't mind at first, but after a while he decided that he liked the shape to which he was accustomed. Besides, he said that any shape *he* was born in must have been meant by nature to be the highest of all, and he preferred to remain that way. No one dared remind him that he was born as a baby, and not as an adult."

"Quite a problem," murmured MacPalnar. "Now, if he were interested in scientific problems, we'd be able to do something for him. This question of fourth and higher dimensions—"

"They'd only confuse his mind. Unless — here's an idea, MacPalnar. Is there any way of converting your scientific problems into a personal form? Put them in a personal way, and he'll realize that science is always conquering new universes."

"Thank you," said MacPalnar.

"Don't mention it. As I told you, I appreciate science, even though I lack time to understand it. But even I am forced to understand things when they're put in a way that affects me personally. So I suggest that if you could do that, you'd be getting places."

"That's what will have to be done," agreed MacPalnar. "Exactly how, of course, is not so clear. However—" He interrupted himself. "Eureka!"

"What was that remark?"

"An ancient expression still current among scientists. It means that I have found it. It just shows what you can do when you keep trying!"

THERE was the task of explaining to Zaron exactly what new universe he was going to conquer. MacPalnar and the general, as co-authors of the idea, went together to see him.

There were endless guards, protective devices, psychological traps, and other appurtenances of Lordship that had to be passed before they could be ushered into the Presence. Not that Zaron really needed them. He had long before been made practically invulnerable to all but the most elaborate weapons. But these difficulties put into the way of lowly subjects were indispensible means of emphasizing his own grandeur and magnificence.

For the sake of this audience he had magnified himself to three times normal size. He sat with inconceivable dignity on his throne, a luminous crown upon his head, a background of tiny blazing lights, like the stars of the universe he ruled, framing his majestic figure. Involuntarily, even against his conscious will, MacPalnar felt the sense of loyalty rise in his throat and almost choke him. At the same time, he could not help wondering how he was going to explain to that feeble and unexercised intellect exactly what new glory he had in store for it.

He and the general both bowed deeply. A rolling bass voice said grandly, "Rise, loyal subjects. Rise and speak."

They had given him a new voice, a remade body, everything but a better brain. They would have given him that too, thought MacPalnar, if he hadn't refused it so decisively. He had been too much in love with his own weak mind to want it changed in the slightest. His subjects had to be loyal to the old one, such as it was.

MacPalnar trembled as he rose to his feet. "Your Supremacy," he said respectfully, "we have heard of your wish to have new universes to conquer. As

becomes loyal subjects, we have striven to fulfill our Lord's desire. Now we think we have succeeded. We offer you a new universe. Or to be more accurate, an infinity of new universes."

"Where is it?"

Now, thought MacPalnar, comes the difficult part. He said, "It is not easy to attain, nor is it easy to describe. If Your Supremacy will forgive me for explaining—"

"I am not frightened of difficulties. Explain quickly."

MacPalnar began with his example of the sheet of paper and the fourth dimension. It was the classic approach to young students of science. His Supremacy said, "This new universe you offer me is a sheet of paper?"

MacPalnar gulped. "Your mind grasps things quickly, Your Lordship. It is, in a way, like a sheet of paper. Suppose we stretch the sheet out flat. And then suppose we expand it into a third dimension, make a thick book of it, as if we had added a large number of sheets of paper."

"Instead of one sheet of paper, many. I see."

"Your Supremacy's intellect penetrates the murkiness of my explanation. Well, if in a similar way we expand a three-dimensional object into a fourth dimension, that will be like adding an infinite number of three-dimensional objects to it."

It was, MacPalnar admitted to himself, a difficult conception to grasp, and he was not surprised at His Supremacy's difficulties. Finally, Zaron said, "Give me the thinking drug. For the moment, I would sharpen my mind."

With the aid of the drug and of additional explanations, he finally understood. He was to be stretched, not merely in size in the usual three dimensions, but into an entirely new dimension. He was to become a new being.

"Your Supremacy grasps things very quickly," said MacPalnar. "At present we make use of the fourth dimension merely as a means of travel. Being only three-dimensional ourselves, we cannot really master it. We can influence it no more than a two-dimensional figure cut out of a sheet of paper without thickness can influence our own world."

"Is the stretching into a new dimension safe?" demanded His Supremacy.

"Yes, Lordship, we have experimented, first with inanimate objects and then with living creatures.

"Intelligent creatures?"

"A shrewd question. Yes, with them too. But we have not dared permit them to remain long. To enter this new universe is to become independent of our own. That is a privilege reserved only for Your Supremacy. Therefore, before extending the subjects of experiment into a new dimension, we have injected them with a slow-acting poison. They lived long enough to show that the experiment was a success, and then they died, that they might not compete in supremacy with *Your* Supremacy."

Zaron sat silent and seemed to try to think.

"There is an advantage I have not mentioned," said MacPalnar diffidently. "At present Your Supremacy is almost invulnerable, but not quite. Extending into a fourth dimension, you would be completely indestructible by all three-dimensional creatures. Even if that part of you left in our dimensions were destroyed, you would not be affected. If a three-dimensional creature like myself were to lose a two-dimensional slice of my body, of no thickness, I should not know the difference. Just so, a four-dimensional creature would hardly be aware of a three-dimensional loss."

"I should be completely indestructible," mused Zaron. So, despite all the human and mechanical guards, despite all the loyalty, he still feared assassination.

"Completely," agreed MacPalnar.

It was the decisive argument. MacPalnar had anticipated painful cogitation, lengthy arguments. Zaron said only, "In that case I shall have a mind

completely at rest. I need no longer fear even imperfections in the faithful devotion of my subjects. I shall do it."

WITH a hand on the switch that would create the force-field and add another dimension to the Lord of the Universe, that would project His Supremacy into new universes to conquer, MacPalnar had a sudden qualm. "Perhaps," he said in panic, "there is a danger, one that we have overlooked."

"There is nothing to fear," the general assured him. "Our experiments on that point are decisive."

"What of the food and weapons he will need?"

"Already dispatched. All the four-dimensional creatures at present in existence are of low intelligence. Lower even than Zaron's. He will have no difficulty with them."

"But what if—"

"It is too late for objections," said the general impatiently. "Pull the switch!"

The switch closed, the current raced through the wires and ionized gaps. Mighty forces concentrated on the Lord of the Universe.

MacPalnar watched him change. The great figure seemed to swell inward, to grow and yet to take up less space than before. The face wavered, changed into a strange mass of geometrical surfaces, and then disappeared entirely. The arms went next, then the body, until finally there was left only one mighty foot, a foot that moved restlessly to give an effect of curious distortion.

"He is conquering the other universes," said the general solemnly.

A wave of emotion drove slowly across MacPalnar's face. A strange light shone in his eyes. "And now," he stammered, "and n-now—"

"What is it, MacPalnar?"

"And now ours is free," said MacPalnar unexpectedly. "Free of him and his mad whims."

They stared at each other. The general asked, "Is this disloyalty?"

"No, General. I could not be disloyal if I tried. Zaron is alive and well, as we knew he would be. He will always be alive and well. But subconsciously I realized that doing this would free us of him. I dared not say it to myself, but in one way or another I must have realized it."

"He is still Our Supremacy," said the general.

"And he always will be. But he will know nothing of us. Remember, if he is infinite to us, we are infinitesimal to him."

"I don't understand," said the general.

"What do three-dimensional creatures like us know of the two-dimensional worlds that may exist? To us they have no thickness, they are beyond our reach. And in the same way, we are beyond his. We see Zaron only a three-dimensional cross-section, now a foot, later perhaps something else. But what can a foot see of us?"

The General shook his head. "Perhaps some day there will be an eye—"

"Only a three-dimensional cross-section of a four-dimensional eye. If it perceives us at all, it will perceive us only as shadows, and the four-dimensional brain will think us unreal. Yes, we are beyond Zaron's reach."

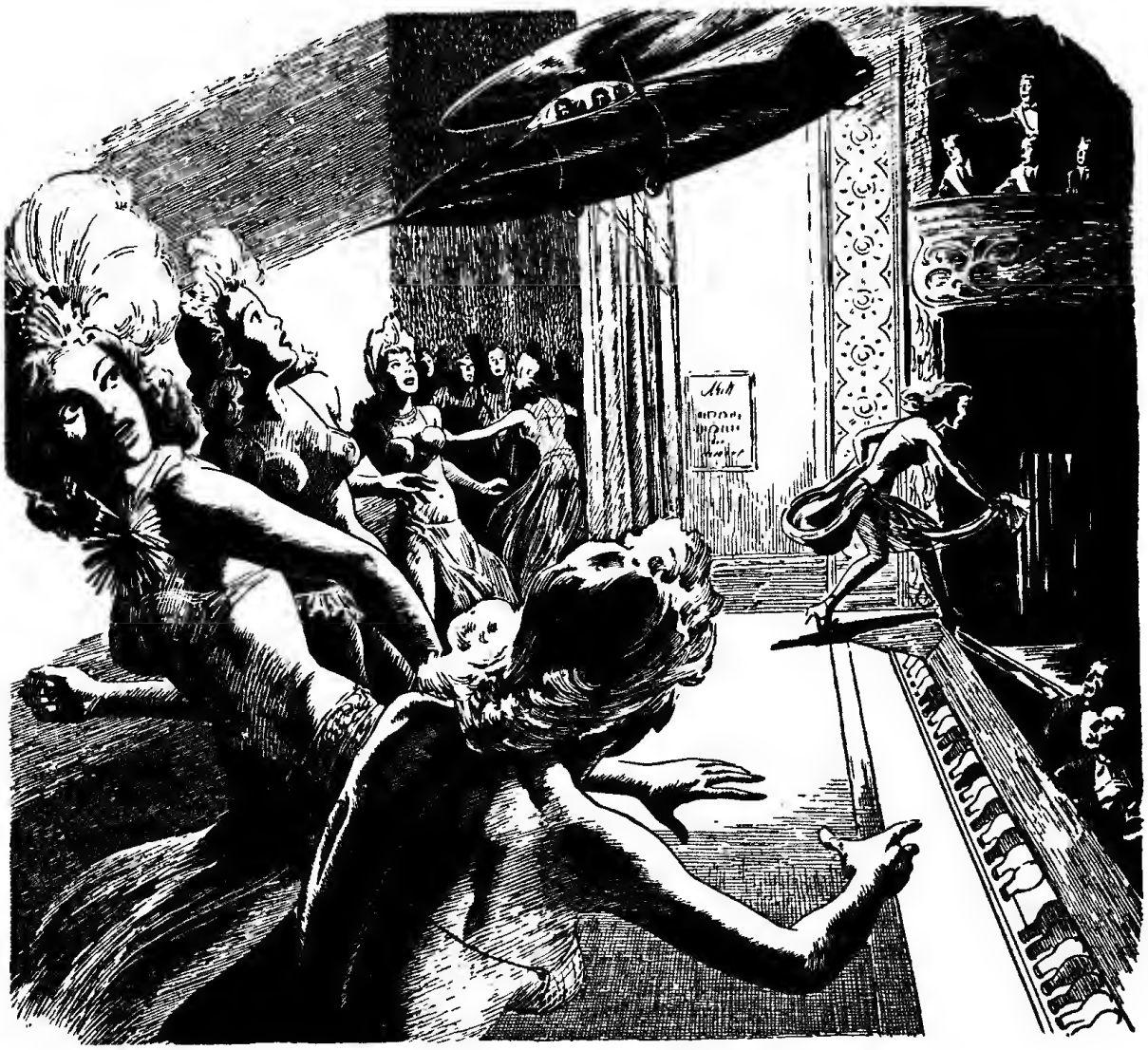
"Then we need a new emperor?"

"No, for the old one is still with us. We shall do without a new one very well, just as we shall do without the interference of the old one. But loyalty is bred into us, and that we cannot escape. So we shall always reverence that part of Zaron that we can still see, even if it be only his foot."

"But to render devotion to a foot," objected the general, "is absurd!"

"Is it any more absurd than to render devotion to the rest of Zaron? Whether absurd or not, loyalty is loyalty, and must receive its due."

And scientist and general, with lumps of loyalty in their throats, and at the same time a sense of relief such as they had never before known, knelt and paid homage to the Supreme Foot.



We landed on a stage on which there were a number of young ladies

THE BEST POLICY

By PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

Ask me no questions—or I'll tell you the truth!

REPORT TO EVON JUSTAD, GRAND EIMAR, FOURTH PLANET, FROM AGENT 39 J905:

Dear Justad:

Forgive the informality of my addressing you by just your last name. It may be the result of the body I am wearing. Justad, if you could only see me now! I was tempted for a while to take the body of a female human. It was as quaintly shaped as those of the males—one head, four appendages, and other such absurdities—but followed more pleasingly spherical lines.

It was considered best, though, since the male is the dominant class on this planet (as reported in the journals of the previous expedition) to confine ourselves to the wearing of the male form, the better to establish communication with important personages as soon as possible.

My own costume is that of a small, rather gray, male of approximately middle age. Although his face was quite bare at the time I got him from the slab in the morgue, it soon became painfully evident to me that he—or rather I—would have to acquire a pair of the lenses that are worn over the eyes to correct deficiencies in vision. I am now therefore wearing what I am told by the oculist are known as pince-nez.

The landing of our space ship caused an even greater degree of consternation than that occasioned by the landing of the first expedition.

Please send a note to our dispatcher and let him know that we did NOT land in the middle of a desert, as promised. As a matter of fact, our ship materialized with rather spectacular results, on a raised platform, or stage, on which a number of young ladies dressed in a minimum of clothing were going through odd ritualistic pantomimes. We dispersed rapidly, amid much vocal activity on the part of both the young ladies and the spectators, most of whom were male, with their hair cut to provide a circular view of pinkish scalps.

It is most unfortunate that the motives of our first expedition were so misunderstood by the local inhabitants.

AS YOU may remember, from having read the reports of that ill-fated expedition, the inhabitants of the third planet are ridden by many strange prejudices. Chief among them is that against the taking of life—their own lives, that is. They seem only too ready to take ours.

Wishing to observe the local customs, therefore, we were careful not to usurp any bodies still occupied by their own spirits. Proceeding directly to an establishment known locally as a morgue, we had our pick of vacant bodies. Kaomi, who you know is unnaturally fastidious about his appearance, was the only one of us who failed to be satisfied with any of the available ones. He is currently making do with the body of a rather beautiful dog, silky haired and aloof-looking. We all agree that it is a good fit, but personally, I consider it a risky business, schooled as we are only in the human dialect of this region.

The first newspaper we bought was already shrill with alarm over our arrival. "Invaders from space," they called us, with such sub-titles as "Murderers return," and "*The Thing* sighted on stage of Minsky's."

Needless to say, this is all rather discouraging to sincere scientists such as ourselves who are anxious only to pool our information with this civilization to the mutual benefit of all. As I may have implied, the main trouble stems from the impulsive activity of the previous expedition which rather arbitrarily preempted bodies through which to work. We hoped that our procedure would be reassuring to the populace—using only the cast-off bodies which they so wastefully discard after just one wearing.

Once suitably equipped, we held a conference to determine the best method of getting in touch with the authorities who could give us the information we want.

Roblan was all for direct action. He got out his dictionary in order to brush up on the exact terms he wished to use, approached a native and asked where he could find the Mayor. The native gave us directions to a place he called the City Hall. I won't attempt to describe the conveyances by which we got there. Justad, they are unbelievable!

As we started up a flight of stairs at the City Hall, a large man whose coat was striped with twin rows of brass buttons, tapped Roblan on the shoulder. "Hey, you!" he said. "Aren't you Nick,

the Needle?" He seized Roblan roughly and began to shout with vigor. Several similarly dressed persons converged on our group with amazing speed. "It's the Needle," several of them yelled, as though confirming the opinion of the first.

The last man to arrive stopped suddenly, turned extremely white. "It can't be!" he said. He seemed to have difficulty enunciating the words. "It can't be," he repeated. "That's Nick, the Needle, all right. But the last time I saw him he was lying on a slab in the morgue!"

"Holy Smoke!" said another. "That's right! I heard that he was brought in last night!"

Roblan sought to end their confusion. "It's really very simple," he said clearly. "I am not Nick, the Needle. I am an inhabitant of the fourth planet, known to you as Mars, and I am here on official and very important business."

THE MEN were suddenly very silent. We hoped that they were sufficiently enlightened to show us the way to the Mayor's room. We observed that they now were all the same parchment-colored hue as the last speaker. One of them slowly raised his lethal weapon—gun, in the local dialect—and pointed it at Roblan.

In sudden alarm, Roblan said—and I want you to understand he said it very distinctly. We all heard him clearly—Roblan said, "My business is peaceful. I have come for the mutual benefit of all." Does not that seem to you an entirely lucid and unequivocal statement?

You can imagine our surprise, therefore, when the man continued to point his gun, pulled the trigger, and killed Roblan quite dead. We hoped for a while that he had been able to disentangle himself from the nervous system of the body he was wearing, but as he has not rejoined us, in any form, we can only assume that some part of his essential being was permanently damaged. It might be well if you notified his relatives of his demise. Some people are interested in such things.

But to get back to my report— Can you imagine the confusion into which we were thrown by this incident? We had all heard Roblan, definitely and distinctly heard him, tell these natives that his business was peaceful. Why, then, this unprovoked attack? The weapon had acted with an explosive noise, which caused quite a commotion throughout the building. Doors flew open and large numbers of natives quickly congregated. We stood there for several minutes, stupefied by this unexpected change in fortune. We were quite unnoticed in the crowd, indicating, I suppose, that the bodies we had chosen were typical of the norm in this locality. This was reassuring under the circumstances.

Kevarin took charge of our group, being the next in command. He rented this hotel room, whence we have retired, pending some reasonable explanation of this incident.

Our minds are in a turmoil. Could it be possible that on this planet, in so many ways on such a high level of technical development (equal to, though different from our own), could it be possible that such a thing as *Falsehood* is practiced here? We know, of course, that such a word exists in their language. You may remember that it was the cause of much discussion after the translation of the native papers sent to our planet by the ill-fated first expedition. We all—yourself included, I believe—assumed it to be an archaic term surviving from a lower level of development. If this should not be the case, if, indeed, it is a modern term, the accomplishment of our mission will be enormously complicated. Imagine trying to communicate with an alien tribe such as this if they will not even trust our spoken word!

I hope that our next report will contain better news. May the sun shine brightly on you.

AGENT 39 J905

Dear Justad:

It is as we feared. We will not be taken at voice value. In fact, it appears that our inborn inability to tell a falsehood is going to work against us.

Kaomi has just returned after a harrowing experience. I believe I informed you that he chose to wear the body of a dog rather than the unattractive human form. We all warned him about this, but he persisted in his folly. Since our hotel room is equipped only for humans, it has been necessary for him to leave the room from time to time. On his last trip out to the sidewalk, he was accosted by the doorman.

"Here, Doggie," he called to Kaomi. "Here, Doggie, Doggie. Where do you think you're going without a leash?"

Kaomi raised his nose aloofly and said, "I was merely planning a walk down to the fire hydrant at the corner."

The doorman (according to Kaomi) staggered backward, banging himself sharply against a pillar. Kaomi realized that it was very unfortunate that he had been compelled to answer a direct question and was more perturbed yet when the doorman followed it with another one.

"Who are you, anyway?" he muttered hoarsely.

"My Martian name is Kaomi," answered Kaomi, wagging his tail in the gesture that he believed indicated friendly intentions among the canines of the second planet.

"Did you come in that thing—that flying saucer that I saw the pictures of?" the man asked. He was barely whispering by then.

"Yes," Kaomi said pleasantly.

The man let out a piercing shriek that brought Kevarin and me dashing to the window. We saw a terrible sight. A crowd had gathered and given chase to Kaomi. They were gaining on him rapidly. Poor Kaomi, who hates physical endeavor, no matter what kind of body he is equipped with, was panting down the street, a hairsbreadth in front of the clutching hands, tail between his legs, eyes rolling wildly. He managed to evade them by crossing the path of a large oncoming vehicle.

He returned to us a little while ago, a chastened man. I use the term advisedly. Somewhere he had found a human body. We did not inquire too closely about it, but I am sure Kaomi would not do anything that might endanger the success of our mission.

You can see the predicament we are in, however. Here we are, unable *not* to answer a direct question truthfully. And when we do answer one, we don't know what part of the truth the natives will believe!

Apparently Roblan's statement that he was a Martian was believed (due in part to the fact that the body he was wearing was known to the observers to have belonged to a dead man), but his statement of friendly intent was not. The natives seem horror-stricken at discovering that we are among them!

We are still puzzling over the dilemma of how we are to study the psychology of the natives without endangering ourselves by being subjected to direct questions.

I will report again when we have reached a conclusion!

(You know who!)
AGENT 39 J905

Dear Justad:

I have startling news to report. Startling and unbelievable. I still don't understand just what has happened.

I will take up chronologically the events following my last letter.

I was chosen to venture into the lobby of the hotel to buy the latest paper. This I did with trepidation, but since the transaction involved only the dropping of certain coins into a slot, I managed to do it without being accosted. I returned to the room with the newspaper.

I spread it out on the bed, and there, staring up at us from the front page, was a picture of Kevarin, with the caption: "Orders are to shoot on sight." Kevarin sat down in the chair somewhat groggi-

ly and asked me to read the report aloud. I did so. The bodies missing from the morgue, it said, undoubtedly were serving as disguises for the invaders from space. Three bodies had been stolen: that of Nick Narcetti, known in underworld circles as the Needle (this one had been apprehended and disposed of); that of Bennett Salvorad, his close associate, (meaning Kevarin); and, that of an unidentified man who had been the victim of a hit-run accident. The last referred, undoubtedly, to myself.

"I think," said Kevarin, "that it would be unsafe for me to leave this room." He grasped the arms of the chair as though he were afraid of being parted from it. "It is fortunate that you two are in disguises that have not yet been identified. You can go out into the city undetected and try—" he waved his hand vaguely, "—try to determine what policy we should follow in order to accomplish our purpose."

I wish to emphasize the fact that this should not be construed as cowardice on the part of Kevarin. As you know, he volunteered for this mission. All of us knew the fate of the first expedition. We were aware that this trip might entail some danger. The part we have found so unnerving is our lack of knowledge of this alien psychology. We seem to be moving in the dark, not knowing how they will react in any circumstance.

We puzzled over that word, "disguises." Why should they think that we were disguised? Roblan, for instance, had told them very clearly that he was a Martian. It is too bad that we couldn't have brought some non-human type bodies with us from Mars, but you know how unfavorably they react to space travel. We really had no alternative but to leave them at home and acquire local models when we arrived here.

After much consultation, we decided that Kevarin was indeed right. The only course open for us was for me, in my unidentified body, and Kaomi, in the one for which he had traded his dog likeness, to venture forth in search of answers to these puzzles that plagued us. We decided that the safest method, that which would most likely avoid situations where we might be directly accosted and asked our identities, would be to travel only in crowds.

Accordingly, we descended to the street in that odd contraption known as an "elevator."

KAOMI went north and I turned south along the sidewalk, being careful to move in groups of several persons. Once I collided forcibly with a gentleman who stopped suddenly to examine silk hosiery displayed on a female statue in a store window, but he said something like, "Skews me." I repeated it, and the incident was at an end.

I proceeded several blocks southward, finally taking my place at the end of a slowly moving line that was wending its way into a tall building. It seemed an excellent opportunity to get into an indoor crowd where I might better observe the strange conduct of the natives. Oh, for a clue as to how we could establish friendly contact with them!

I had one close call while standing in this line. The man in front of me turned suddenly and asked, "Going to the quiz broadcast?"

I thought quickly, decided that probably the quiz broadcast was the object of the people in the line, and said, "Yes." He dropped the subject.

I was ushered into a large room, a sort of auditorium, and seated in a comfortable chair facing a raised platform. The room was filled with rows of such chairs. To tell the truth, it was with some relief that I transferred my weight from my feet which were beginning to ache and burn outrageously. I would like to meet the former tenant of this body and tell him a thing or two about fitting shoes!

The stage was equipped with a microphone similar to the ones we use, and I recalled that the previous expedition had reported radio broadcasts on this planet for amusement purposes. This

was apparently one of them, but I could not at first decide just what type of amusement was being attempted. The man who seemed to be the leader of the proceedings was neither decorative nor pleasant voiced, so I assumed that his function was not aesthetic. He did go through a number of amusing facial contortions, chief of which is the one known locally as laughing. He exhorted the audience to do likewise, then put them through various exercises, such as clapping their hands together. I joined the rest in these activities, but failed to find them particularly amusing.

Presently the man on the stage made an announcement indicating that this was merely the preliminary, "warm-up," I believe he called it, to the actual broadcast which would now begin. For this purpose he called forward a person chosen by pre-arrangement and began asking questions.

In the next few minutes, my confusion became complete. The broadcast apparently consisted of a verbal examination similar to those which we Martians must pass in order to occupy positions of authority in the government. Apparently there was a system of rewards consisting of units of the local exchange media paid by the examiner for correct answers. But, Justad, here comes the unbelievable part! The examiner, even though he was penalized when the questions he asked were answered correctly, acted in such a way that only correct answers were possible! He wouldn't *let* "the contestant" miss! If he couldn't convey the answer by broad verbal hints, he did so by written ones! And far from being shocked by such obviously dishonorable tactics, the audience seemed to find them eminently satisfactory.

Frankly, Justad, my morale was now at its lowest point. I considered going back to the hotel and advising the others simply to go back to Mars. How could we ever prove ourselves trustworthy to beings such as these? In no way did we seem to think alike. I reflected that we needed more data, that the information acquired by the first expedition had been too scanty—

It was then that the man approached my seat which was next to the aisle. I had noticed him in the background of the broadcast and had presumed that he was some sort of assistant. He grabbed me by the arm and bared his teeth horribly. In recapitulating the event, it occurs to me that it was a gesture of friendliness known as a smile, but at the time he looked merely hungry.

HE GRIPPED my arm tightly. "Would you be willing to take part in an impartial test for the benefit of the radio audience?" he inquired belligerently. I nodded numbly. I could not at the moment think of words with which to refuse.

Seconds later I found myself in front of the microphone. I had intended to speak to none of the natives and soon I would broadcast to, I knew not how many! I trembled violently.

I can remember what followed, but as I still do not comprehend the meaning of it, perhaps I should repeat it to you verbatim.

The man who was conducting the examinations stepped away from the microphone, and three young females approached. Locking arms, they sang, not unpleasingly, the following song:

Crunchie-Wunchies are the best,
Crunchie-Wunchies stand the test.
If you want a snack to eat,
That's delicious, crisp, and sweet,
Try that chocolate coated treat—
EAT——

CRUNCHIE-WUNCHIES!

WHILE I was still confusedly trying to decipher this, the assistant who was holding my arm suddenly pulled me forward, and grasping the microphone with one hand while he continued to restrain me with the other, said:

"I hope that you of the radio audience have taken my advice and are prepared to try the taste test with us. Have you

a bar of your favorite candy by the radio? Have you also a bar of the new improved Crunchie-Wunchies? You all know what our taste test is. Trust yourself! Take a bite of your regular candy bar. Now bite into that sweet, c r u n c h y, chocolate-coated bar of Crunchie-Wunchies. See the difference?" He paused dramatically, meanwhile gripping my arm even more tightly.

"In case you forgot to prepare to join us in the taste test, we have a gentleman on the stage here who has kindly consented to do it for you. He was selected at random from the studio audience."

He fixed me with a hypnotic eye.

"Have you ever met me before?" he demanded.

"N-never," I quavered.

"Have you ever been approached by any employee of the Crunchie-Wunchie company or of this radio network?"

"N-no!" I assured him.

"Are you prepared to give us your absolutely honest and unbiased opinion, to answer our questions with complete truthfulness?" he continued.

I, of course, said "Yes." As though I could do anything else!

A hitherto unseen assistant appeared with a large board adorned with gaily colored objects.

"Which of these is your favorite candy bar?" asked my captor.

"I have none," I said.

"In that case," he picked out a brownish colored bar, "in that case, we will give you one of the best-selling brands. The studio audience can see that it is a well-known variety, although for obvious reasons I cannot mention its name. Now try a bite of this well-known candy bar." He thrust it at me imperiously.

I hesitated only a moment. I had not yet had the opportunity to try the taste or digestive system of the body I was wearing. But if this were the common fare of the inhabitants, it was not apt to be dangerous. I bit into it. Ah, how can I describe it, Justad? It was delicious. A little like Hebryth nuts encased in shredded sugirhol, the whole dipped in the choicest of foughlerian gavs. You can imagine!

"Now try the new improved Crunchie-Wunchie bars with the added dextrose and twice as many peanuts," he demanded.

I bit into it. Well, it wasn't bad. Still—

"Now," he said, putting an arm across my shoulders, "I want you to give us your honest opinion. Did you notice any difference between the bars?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "A definite difference!" I was feeling much better. This was easier than I had imagined.

"Would you put it in your own words, please." He bared his teeth at me again.

"Well, the Crunchie-Wunchies aren't nearly as flavorful," I said. "They are too sweet and too slimy in texture, except for the nuts. The nuts stick in my teeth."

I paused, rather pleased with myself. I thought I had put it quite succinctly. I stood there complacently, wondering if he had any more questions to ask.

A moment passed— Something happened in that time, Justad. What it was I can't tell you. My captor still had his arm across my shoulder, his teeth were still displayed in full, but something had changed in the quality of his expression. He looked like an ice sculpture from the caves of Thybolas, where we spent that memorable vacation—

THERE was absolute silence for a moment, and then a murmur swept through the audience, excited, incredulous, about—something.

"Ha, ha, ha!" said my captor. "You are a card, Mister. Here you have the listening audience believing your little joke! Come on now, tell us what you really thought about Crunchie-Wunchies. Wasn't it the most delectable confection you ever set teeth to?"

The man who had asked the examination questions was standing on the stage, just out of view of the audience.

He waved something wildly at me—a piece of paper. It took me a moment to realize that it was a piece of the local money such as I had in my billfold, (thanks to your careful provisioning for this trip, Justad,) but in a much larger dimension.

The three young ladies who had sung were mouthing the word "Yes."

"Isn't it?" my captor continued. His forehead was beaded with perspiration. "Isn't it your ideal of candy come true? Incomparable in flavor? Answer me now, isn't it?"

"No," I said.

Suddenly, the three singers swept forward again, the orchestra struck up a tune, and the song started again.

"Crunchie-Wunchies are the best,
Crunchie-Wunchies stand the test—"

My captor dragged me off stage and into another room. "O.K., Mac," he said. "Who sent you? Was it those Kandy Kid people or was it the other network? Come clean, now. We know you didn't think of it yourself!" He thrust me roughly against the wall and faced me, nose to nose.

To say I was bewildered, would be putting it mildly. I don't know what I would have done if two things had not happened almost simultaneously. From one end of the hall came a brisk, gray-suited man who showed a card to my captor which made him fall back respectfully. From the other end, from the direction of the audience, came a woman red-eyed, shrill, wildly pointing.

"That's him!" she was saying. "That's him. The deserter! And her with four children to feed!"

I was getting confused. "What was the question you asked me?" I said to my original captor. The commotion had made me forget momentarily.

"Why did you say the other candy bar was better?" he wailed.

"Because it was!" I answered, getting just a bit angry myself. "And I cannot tell a lie!"

"O.K., George Washington," said the gray-coated man. "I'm from the secret service, and we were told to be on the lookout for alien psychologies. If yours isn't an alien psychology, I don't know what one would look like. Better come quietly. Our orders were to shoot first and ask questions later, but since I'm not sure you're one of the invaders—"

"Invader, bosh!" said the wild-eyed lady. "That's my son-in-law, George Pettiwinkle. The deserter! Left my daughter and her four youngsters two nights ago. Said he was going for a little walk! Hasn't been seen since. Poor Sally's been carrying on something awful. Thought something had happened to him. Here she's sitting home crying her heart out while he gallivants to radio shows!"

"Missing since two nights ago?" mused the gray-coated man. "That would check with the body in the morgue. Tell me, lady, did your son-in-law have any disabilities—uh, anything that might predispose him to an accident?"

"Why, no, I don't think—unless maybe his glasses. He broke them a few days ago!"

Her voice trailed off and they all looked at me.

"Tell me," said the gray-coated man. There was something ominous about this voice. "Have you an explanation of all this? If you cannot tell a lie, it might be quite interesting."

It was the moment I had been dreading.

I tried to be silent. Forgive me, Justad, but I even tried to invent a falsehood, but the habit of centuries was too great. I couldn't avoid answering that direct question!

"I'm Evon Seeehanna, daughter of the Grand Eimar of the Fourth planet. I am part of the expedition from that planet which was sent to the third to pool information with the scientists here." The gray-coated man was reaching for something in his pocket. I feared it was a weapon. "Our intentions are peaceful. Since we couldn't bring our

bodies with us, we had to acquire some. How else could we communicate with you?"

"And you cannot tell a lie—," said the gray-coated man. "Brother, that's a whopper if I ever heard one. Daughter of—" He began to laugh.

MY FORMER captor was looking worried. He tapped the gray-coated man on the shoulder and conversed with him earnestly for a minute, in a voice too low for me to hear. The gray-coated man turned to me and pointed a gun.

"Maybe it's true, at that," he said sternly. "Griffin here has convinced me that your actions on the radio program were just not human. In that case—" He looked puzzled. He scratched his graying hair. "In that case, at least part of what you say might be true—"

"I cannot tell a lie," I repeated.

"I think you and I are going to take a trip to the Pentagon, Mister—Miss. Come along now."

So, here I am in Washington. The gentlemen at the Pentagon were suspicious at first. They believed I was a Martian—my body was now positively identified, but they were at a loss to know whether to shoot me or to exchange information. I kept telling them that I couldn't tell a falsehood, but the general with the most stars kept saying, "How do we know that that isn't one?"

"Did you hear the broadcast that gave us a line on him — her?" asked the secret service man.

"No," said the general, "but it will be rebroadcast here in a few minutes."

"Tell me," said the general, "what have you Martian scientists to offer in the way of scientific information?"

"The science of government," I suggested hopefully. It seemed to be what they were most in need of. As they seemed unimpressed, however, I named some lesser things. "Space drive. Atomic fusion—"

The general covered his face with his hands. "If we only knew we could trust him—her," he said. "If we only knew that it wasn't a trick!"

"It's time for the broadcast, sir," said someone. They switched on the radio, listened to the quiz questions, listened to the song. They bent eagerly toward the radio as my portion of the program was repeated. I sat there squirming. Such a foolish feeling, hearing one's own voice!

The general straightened and turned off the radio. He was smiling. "I think we can trust her, don't you?" he said. There was a matching smile on the other faces.

"Did you ever taste Crunchie-Wunchies?" asked someone.

"Now, if you are ready to get down to business—" started the general.

As you can see, Justad, the first part of our mission is completed. Friendly communication is established, and they trust me. Although I still cannot understand what overcame their original distrust. We sent for Kevarin and Kaomi, and they will be here tomorrow. I am staying at a place called Blair House and am quite happy.

Except for one thing. Thus far, every effort we have made has been to let them know how trustworthy we are. It has been difficult because of the practice of falsehood on this planet. The thing that is worrying me now is this: how are we to know whether *they* are telling the truth?

Your loving daughter,
Seeehanna.
AGENT 39 J905

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A figure lay grotesquely sprawling upon the sloping

I

ACROSS the darkness between Earth and Mars swings the giant chain of repeater stations, a great beaded pathway for the voice of men between the planets.

When you lift the phone and dial "I" for interplanetary you never think of the vast machines that swarm into action, hurling your voice through forty million miles of space. You never dream of the men who ride the lonely orbits tending the machines that nurse man's chit-chat between the planets. But they are there nevertheless. They always are.

Your voice is powered with the energy of a million horses and hurled from Earth. And after a million miles, the first repeater grabs the tiny remnant of that vast energy and gives it another mighty boost to speed it on its way.

That's how you talk to Mars. Forty repeaters in that chain. To Venus a few less. Their orbits are timed with the movements of the worlds, and the chain expands and contracts as the planets

Rootless, They Were Bargaining the Past

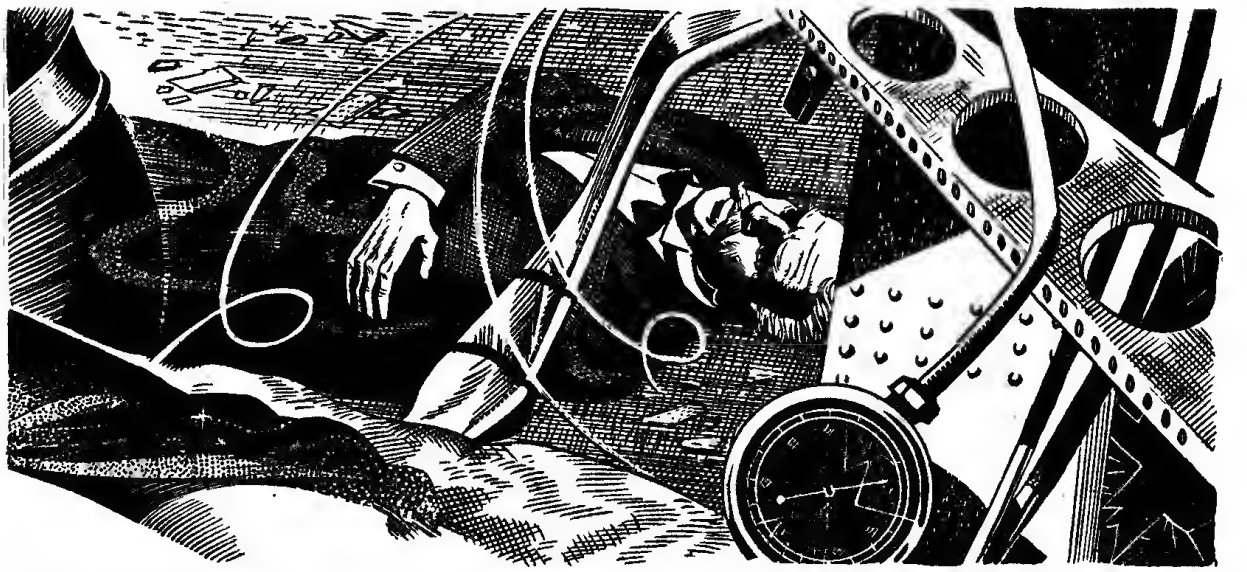
COLLISION

Spaceship Rams Satellite!

●

A Novelet

By RAYMOND F. JONES



surface. It turned over, and he saw Eve Daray's face

shift. A hundred thousand channels in each chain can carry that number of conversations and news and video programs from Earth to its fabulous outposts.

Repeater Station 21, just beyond the half way mark to Mars, was little different from its fellows. A great, inert block in space, it varied in only one major respect. The Station Chief was Robert Caryl.

Caryl had been a Station Chief a long time. Five years—that is a long time to ride the orbits without the sight of Earth or freedom from the ever demanding repeaters.

And before that he had worked up from rookie repeaterman where he began when he was nineteen. In those early years he had been to Earth but a half dozen times.

He was Interplanetary Communications' ideal repeaterman. When rookies asked for a model they were told about

for the Future—and Old Dreams for New!

Robert Caryl and his way of working.

He ran his station with hard discipline, and his total outages were far less than those of any other station in the System. And he was not demanding of the Company. He accepted the periodic raises that came automatically—and was rewarded for impersonal devotion with swift advance in authority.

The inspectors, chief engineers, and vice-presidents of Interplanetary Communications were entirely satisfied with Robert Caryl.

The men who worked under him took a little different view. They admired his energy, his capabilities for lightning decision that seemed invariably correct, and for his perfectionism that made the station the envy of every other crew.

But with the best station in the System, Robert Caryl had the highest personnel turnover. It the the one thing about the station that he could not master. At the end of yearly contract periods every man was free to ask for transfer. A crippling number of his crew always did—and he forced the remainder to make up for the inefficiency of the newcomers.

THERE were some who stayed on year after year because their capacities matched his most extravagant demands and they liked the efficiency of the station—if not the man who created it.

Others, when they reached other stations and were asked about him, called him a machine without life, ambitions, dreams, or hopes of his own. To them he seemed as much a part of that station as the great power engines deep in its lowest levels.

But even these carried with them their learned perfectionism, and Caryl's drive and energy spread throughout the repeater chains, raising the level of communications standards for the whole Company.

Robert Caryl was a large and bony man with high cheekbones that gave his cheeks a flat, almost sunken expression. His eyes, too, were deep in bony prominence. His peaked hairline was marked with the faintest trace of gray.

He was a bachelor, of course. But he was not old. At thirty-four he was ready to graduate to a higher technical post in the home office. He was going home to Earth within a matter of days!

He had been offered his reward for long, impersonal service, and his rise to the thinner, more powerful echelons of the Company seemed assured—unless he should be unfortunate enough to break one of the inviolable regulations of I.C.

But he did break such a law, and of all Interplanetary's far-flung repeatermen, he seemed the least likely to break the one he did. . . .

Robert Caryl had been at his desk only a few minutes on that morning, checking over the routine reports of the night foremen. The line from the outside communications room buzzed. He flipped the button.

"Yes!"

The radioman's face was flushed. "There's a ship close by, the *Solar Star*, requesting entrance on emergency basis. I told them our policy. Their vessel is spaceworthy, but they insist."

"You know the rules. Cut them off. The Patrol can take care of whatever troubles they have," said Caryl.

From their beginnings the repeater stations had been like islands of security to nervous spacemen. Yachtsmen, particularly, swarmed in at the slightest excuse, asking for entry on the basis of emergency repairs for nothing more than a burned-out light tube.

Early, the Company had erected a barrier of regulations to prohibit such nuisance contacts. Like all its regulations this was enforced upon its own personnel with brutal insistence.

"Would you talk with the young lady, sir?" The radioman's face was miserable. He suspected correctly that he would be recommended for transfer with prejudice at the next rating review.

"She threatens to call the Patrol, and sue the Company," he said. "I don't feel qualified to make judgment in this case."

"Put her on." Caryl acknowledged the crewman's incompetency by his ready agreement.

The face was suddenly replaced by one that startled Caryl with haunting familiarity.

It was no one he knew, yet he had seen her before. Then he almost smiled as recognition came. The woman was Eve Daray. She was an actress and he had monitored almost all her shows during the long early years on the video panel down below.

He nodded. "How do you do, Miss Daray?"

"You've got to let us come to the station!"

He was shocked at her harsh voice and disheveled appearance. This was not the Eve Daray he remembered from his monitoring days.

"You've got to take us aboard the station!" she repeated. "There's murder here on this ship!"

CARYL had a reputation for instantaneous judgment. He used it now. And whatever blind force drove him to it was not to be analyzed until many hours later.

"All right, Miss Daray," he said quietly. "You may inform your Captain that admission is granted on emergency status. Standard contact procedure is employed. Do you understand?"

"Yes—yes," she nodded breathlessly, the tumbled mass of golden hair spinning strands over her face as she spoke. "I'll thank you when we come aboard."

The screen blanked for an instant. Then he contacted the lock technicians. "Ready for emergency boarding. Contact the *Solar Star* on emergency wave."

His work at the moment was finished, but he sat there remembering what he knew of Eve Daray. It was little. He knew that for many years there had been no threat to her position as the leading actress of the day. And he knew the stories that trickled to his attention through the news channels, stories that told of her otherwise wastrel life—notorious parties, a scandalous marriage, and an even more scandalous divorce. This was what he knew of Eve Daray.

The only things worth remembering were the nights of monitoring her programs years ago. She had been young and fresh then and her world of make believe had somehow matched the world of long forgotten dreams he'd abandoned even then.

Those memories of Eve Daray were pleasant.

Now—he wondered about her cry: "There's murder here on this ship!" More evidence of the kind of life she lived, but he couldn't turn her down.

Decisive Moment

COLLISION takes place in space, but this is its first and last resemblance to space opera. It is a story of decision, to borrow slick terminology for a moment, a story of that moment in a man's life when he must choose, for better or worse, the road he is to follow for the rest of his life. Sometimes he sees that road quite clearly and its is loaded with unattractive boulders and mudholes and thank-you-ma'ams—an unlovely choice. Yet things being what they are a man will often enough deliberately desert his comfortable highway for a muddy detour in search of some inner satisfaction he alone can name.

This is the story of one such little detour. You'll find it a fascinating job.

—The Editor

It would be marked against him: The Company would hold that he should have called the Patrol and let the *Solar Star* drift. But he couldn't do that.

He had seldom been close enough to men to read their emotions or understand their hopes. As part of his job he had trained himself away from that. But there was one face whose every expression he could understand. That was the face of Eve Daray. He had learned to read it long ago.

Her expression of a moment ago was terror. The ship had to come in. The Company inspectors would have to be made to understand that simple fact when they questioned his admission of it.

From the office he passed through the main switchroom to the corridor beyond. There he took the elevator to the locks on the lowest level where all service functions of the station were located.

II

IN THE contact room the *Solar Star* was being viewed on a plate by the communicator and lock technicians. They were staring at the ship with strange wonder on their faces.

John Hortan, an ex-space freight captain in charge of the locks, looked up quickly as Caryl entered.

"There's something wrong aboard that ship," he said. "We lost contact five minutes ago, and their approach isn't right."

Caryl sensed now the tension in the others—as if they were aware of some danger in which they couldn't believe and which they were ashamed to admit in his presence for fear of ridicule.

But his own eyes caught it without their telling.

The *Solar Star* was coming up from below—gravity units gave the station an orientation—and the ship was not attempting to enter the correct approach pattern.

Caryl's eyes widened as he took in the trajectory markings on the screen and checked the velocity of the ship. His face went gray with forced belief.

He stepped to the alarm mike and pressed the beep switch to command attention throughout the station.

"Evacuate three lower levels," he ordered. "Clear outer rings at all levels and congregate in the central switchroom. Lie on the floor. Prepare for collision!"

Then he turned to his fellows in the room and beckoned them on. They walked as if in a vacuum as they moved with quiet intensity to the elevator. Behind them the neglected image of the wild ship grew in the silent screen.

Emergency lifts were available for following crewmen on this and other levels. These were traveling chains with hand holds by which men could be carried swiftly upward through almost weightless channels.

There were nearly eight hundred people on the station, including the families of the technicians. Some of them wouldn't make it to the switchroom or other points of safety. The *Solar Star* was too close for that.

But several score were already in the room when Robert Caryl entered. It was almost quiet. Women were sitting on the floor, most with children grouped close by. Some of the babies were crying, but that was the only sound of disorder—as it should have been, since none were permitted to live at the stations unless they conformed to rigid psychological requirements. They had discipline, if nothing else, Caryl thought with satisfaction.

Off-duty crewmen hurried in, small groups exchanging private speculations, then breaking rapidly as they moved towards their families.

Caryl stepped to the switchman's desk in the center of the room and picked up the mike. He repeated his previous order and added, "We're about to collide—"

IT CAME while he was talking. The shock was first. It crumpled Caryl, and his chest hit the desk as he went down.

The others, lying prone, felt as if they were going through a take-off without acceleration protection. It slammed their faces against the floor, and blood streamed suddenly from noses. Lungs collapsed momentarily under the force thrust upward against them.

Then the sound came. The steel screamed. Emergency bulkheads shut with distant, muffled thunder against the vacuum of space as the ship tore through. And far down in the station, or in the ship itself, there was the final bark of some explosion.

For a moment the lights flickered, and then the station was plunged into final darkness. And there was silence again.

Slowly, after a time, Robert Caryl tried to raise himself. He felt a sticky pool of blood under his face. For a moment he thought it doubtful that he would ever move again. But he had to move—and be the first to move.

He put his hands on either side of the desk and raised his body from it. He felt the imprint of his body in the steel top.

He hung over the desk for a moment, struggling against the waves of unconsciousness washing over him. He beat them down by force of will and stood up, hollowed by the threatening pain in his chest.

The atmosphere was heavy with the smell of electrical fire, but that was a minor threat. There was little to burn in the great metal cube of the station, and the automatic equipment could handle that.

In the darkness, the struggling mass of humanity on the floor began to whimper now, and then to cry and scream. Caryl fumbled for the mike before he remembered its uselessness with the power gone.

He raised his voice over the pain level within him and above the cries in the room.

"Give me your attention!"

The level of confusion subsided at once. There was no resentment of his authority now in any mind. His voice rising out of black danger was security, and all within the room quieted except the whimpering, injured babies.

"Kramer!" he called for his Assistant Chief.

"Yes." The man's voice from somewhere in the darkness was weak with pain.

"Take any two men and check the auxiliary power on this level. Get the lights on. Those nearest the emergency kits on the switch panel get out the battery lights and set them up."

At a dozen points crewmen groggy with shock wondered about their own failure to open the luminous squares on the switch panels. In a moment lights appeared dimly as the battery sets were suspended on the panels. Kramer took his men and obtained flashlights from the kits and moved out to attend to the auxiliary power that should have cut in the moment the main supply died.

"How many First Aid Men are present and not seriously hurt?" Caryl asked. "Who is senior?"

Eighteen others stood up or raised their hands. And one called out. Caryl recognized him as Wells of the engineering staff.

"I believe I'm senior here," said Wells. "Hanks and Johnson were working on outer level 12. I don't believe they got here."

"Take charge. Delegate a squad to prepare nearby offices for first aid and surgery. Send another squad to check on personnel in other parts of the station.

"I also want a dozen uninjured men of engineering and maintenance for a survey of station damage. Who is senior engineer present?"

"I am," said Wells. "If you want me to work First Aid, Mason can take the survey."

"Take it, Mason," said Caryl. "Pick your crew and report on the major damage as soon as possible."

FROM somewhere there came the muted whine of a generator now, and the overhead lights flared and died,

then flared again and remained.

Caryl leaned on the desk with both hands, his chest burning inside him. His first glance over the floor in full light appalled him. There were far more than he supposed who were lying prone and unmoving.

"Wells," he ordered, "take as many uninjured as you need and can find to help the First Aid Men. I'll call medical centers . . ."

There was murmuring and shuffling now as the men selected moved through the prone mass of humanity to take up their duties. Caryl sat down heavily before the desk and ran his fingers over a dozen switches.

The main transmitters were out, of course, but each level carried its own emergency power and communication circuits. He checked these. The glow of green pilot lights showed them to be functioning. He switched to the intercom channel connecting all stations.

"Station 21 calling stations 10, 20, and 30. Emergency medical assistance required. We have been rammed by a yacht. Casualties are unknown but damage is extensive.

"Stations 20 and 22, take over all circuits for complete outage of 21. Check, please."

There was momentary silence and then the faces of the Chiefs of the two stations appeared. They held no emotion, but responded with the same robot-like countenances as faced them from 21.

"We're already cut in on high level," said Hawkins of 22. "We knew you were out."

This was routine during station outage. With lowered fidelity and higher noise level, a station could be jumped by adjacent repeaters.

Every tenth station carried a special medical center and 20 reported for them now. "Medical crews will be dispatched with full emergency equipment. Can hospital facilities be set up on your station?"

Caryl nodded. "Some evacuation will be necessary. We'll ask the Patrol to stand by for that, but some hospital arrangements can be set up here. We'll know more after a survey. That is all for now."

They acknowledged and cut off, leaving him alone. Around him, he sensed the slow milling movements of the mass of the station's inhabitants to assess their injuries and repair their wounds.

For the first time he allowed his mind to dwell upon his own problem. He felt of the painfully crushed areas of his head and chest. There were no bones broken as far as he could tell, and he would let it go at that for the time being.

He thought mostly of the impact of this disaster upon his own career. And he was afraid of it. He thought of the appointment that awaited him on Earth, a supervisory engineering post that was in direct line with top level administration.

What would become of that in the face of this?

He wondered if he could be blamed officially for the crash. He could not be saddled with the full responsibility of it. Internal causes aboard the *Solar Star* were not within his control.

But they were, he thought. This would not have happened if he had not authorized the entry of the ship. He had broken the regulations. There was no escape from that fact.

He knew the violence of the Corporation in reprimanding for infractions of its regulations. He had administered such violence many times in the past to those under him, and had congratulated himself on his impersonal efficiency.

It was right, he knew. An organization of this magnitude could not be tolerant of human error.

He looked for no tolerance now. He considered only the potential repercussions upon his own career from the viewpoint of what the regulations demanded as the price of his whim.

But Caryl's case was without precedent. No station had ever been so nearly destroyed beneath the very feet of its Chief—until now.

He had no guide through which to channel his fears. His fate lay with the investigating committee which would certainly be called quickly. If they laid legal blame for the accident upon him, he was through. His past record with I.C. would be worthless then.

If they charged him only with neglect in prohibiting entry of the vessel he might have a chance. There was no way of forecasting the decision.

Already the home office would be in turmoil over the outage. The other stations had probably reported by now. But he had to give them his own report of what had happened. Wiley, the Technical Operations Chief, was the man who had to be told—and he was Caryl's ideal of the impersonal, machine-like administrator who gave no quarter to human error.

While he switched in the circuits for the call that could damn his career, he tried to think back to that moment when he had faced Eve Daray on the screen and given her permission to come in. He cursed the impulsiveness of mind that had gotten beyond his control and led him to jettison his career for a whim. It sickened him, but it was done. . . .

III

IT WAS night in New York, but his call was answered by no routine switchboard attendant. Wiley himself faced Caryl on the screen.

He was a severe faced man and his lips were constantly under pressure.

"We've been waiting for you," he said.

That would be Wiley, of course. He would anticipate the station's internal turmoil and that it would be useless to bother them until someone was ready to report. But it was wholly a matter of efficiency and not personal interest that led to such consideration.

Quickly, Caryl gave him the story from the moment of receiving Eve Daray's message to the present. He described the situation and the measures taken.

Wiley's face grew thinner as Caryl spoke. "You authorized the approach of the vessel although you were fully aware that no emergency had made it unspaceworthy?"

"From the technical point of view: Yes. But Miss Daray's message indicated personnel troubles aboard that threatened the vessel and the lives of its occupants."

Wiley shook his head slowly. "That was no concern of the Corporation's. Our legal obligations do not extend to neurotic actresses whose ship crews get out of hand. It was a clear case for the Patrol. Your only duty was to call them."

"I considered the possible life of someone aboard the ship worth risking the ship's admission," said Caryl doggedly, but he felt he was losing an impossible contest.

"A board of inquiry will be appointed and leave at once," said Wiley. "They will arrive there tomorrow. A repair ship is at 29 and can leave immediately. I understand medical ships are on the way."

"Yes."

For just an instant Wiley's expression changed. "I'm sorry, Caryl. Terribly sorry."

Then the change vanished. "I'll see you tomorrow," he continuued. "You will remain in charge for the moment, but I shall detail Hawkins of 22 as emergency Chief to relieve you. Accord him your cooperation on arrival."

Wiley signed off.

I'll see you tomorrow. So that was the way careers ended. But not his. He'd fight them. They couldn't prove he was responsible for the crash because of his error. It was beyond him. They had to see that. And they had to see he could have done nothing else but what he did.

For a moment he felt a fighting tension. Then it collapsed as he thought of others who had tried to fight a company decision—the men he himself had been forced to discipline.

He didn't blame Wiley. Wiley's attitude was merely the expression of the inevitable of which they were both

aware. The same attitude would apply to Wiley if he made a slip of this magnitude.

Sentiment was foreign to the world of commerce and technology in which they moved.

Sentiment—a weird and incredible sentiment generated in the far lost days when he watched alone at midnight on the monitoring desk and listened to Eve's voice carrying to the far colonies of Mars.

That's why he'd let her ship approach. It was the only honest way to explain it. Whatever internal emergency had arisen could actually have been handled easier by calling in the Patrol.

But Wiley would never know his failing and he'd fight to the end for his career.

He wondered what had actually occurred aboard the ship. Probably no one would ever know. Undoubtedly, they were all killed in the crash.

Eve Daray was dead.

He couldn't have defined the curious nausea that almost overwhelmed him as he thought of the crushed vessel with its nose rammed into the lower levels of the station—thought of it with the corpse of Eve Daray aboard.

HE CALLED Kramer and said, "Take charge. I'm taking a look at the lower levels. I'll be somewhere in the vicinity of the wreck. Send a man after me if it's urgent enough."

He left the switchroom, but in the corridor he felt so utterly sick that he could no longer stand. In the silent hall he leaned against the steel walls and let the choking cry in his throat escape. He couldn't have told in that moment the exact thing for which he was frightened and heartsick, but he knew that all his world was gone.

He walked on after a time, slowly and with a strange regret. The walls that formed the station were familiar in every square inch of their surface, but now it seemed as if they were the cells of some terrible hive from which he dared not flee. Here was protection and sanctuary, but it was his no longer.

It belonged to Interplanetary Communications. It belonged to Wiley and Hawkins. It belonged to strangers, not to him.

He tried the elevator. It was motionless. The chain lifts, too, were out of commission, but he leaned out over the shaft that left him almost weightless and lowered hand over hand until he reached the airtight bulkhead door that had clamped upon the chain, sealing off the shaft.

As he stepped to the corridor from the shaft he heard a ghastly sound of crying. A short distance to his left a seal had smashed across the corridor and a figure was spread eagled against it, beating the cold metal and thick glass ports. And he was making the crying noise that Caryl heard.

Robert Caryl moved toward the man. He touched his arm and looked into the wild, bereft face of madness. The man didn't recognize Caryl.

"Unlock the door!" he cried in agony. "Unlock it. Mary's in there. She was way down in the garden and started running when the alarm came. The door cut her off. Open it up so Mary can get out!"

Caryl recognized the man now. He was Kerns, one of the newer repeatermen, and he had gone to Earth to be married only a month ago. Now Kerns stood before the port pleading frantically with Caryl. Caryl went up to him.

He looked through the thick port, brushing away the frost of his breath upon it. Then he saw dimly the corpse on the floor. It was blackened and swollen beyond recognition as anything human.

Caryl patted Kern's shoulder and walked away. He wondered how many more throughout the station had almost made it—only to be cut off at the very edge of safety.

Kerns' insane cry followed him through the long hall: "Open the door! You've got to let Mary out!"

LOCKS and emergency space suits were provided on every level. All downward bulkheads were closed so Caryl entered the lock on this level and donned a suit, waiting impatiently while the pumps cleared before he stepped out into the silent cold of space.

The suit automatically oriented him with respect to the station so that it was as if he were walking upright on a horizontal surface. He rounded the square corner of the station and got his first look at the wreck.

The ship was no small thing. A full cruiser size yacht, it would have taxed the lock facilities. It was almost as long as the station. But is was a thin spindle in contrast to the square bulk it penetrated.

It had rammed head on, piercing the bottom levels near one corner. Fully half its length pierced the station, shattering the skin in a gigantic slit that opened sixty percent of the levels to space. Midway, the nose of the ship stuck out like the point of some great arrow.

It was worse than Caryl had believed possible. The family quarters sections had been pierced—almost all of them. He wondered how many had died there.

He advanced slowly towards the curled lip of the great metal wound. The meteor deflectors should have had some effect. Perhaps they did. The ship might have rammed all the way through the station without them.

The ship's hull was opened in a score of places. There was little chance of survivors, but he had to see. Any who might be alive would need medical care when the ship from 20 arrived.

He approached the lock of the ship. Clinging precariously in the webbing of torn station beams that cushioned the giant coffin, he operated the external lock controls.

The lock opened well. It did not seem sprung by the crash, but no rush of air burst through the valve as he undogged it.

He went inside and closed it again, but at once he saw that there was no need of care at this point. The inner door was badly sprung and leaking.

And inside the corridor beyond, a frozen blackened corpse lay on the floor.

Something caught his eye and Caryl leaned down closer. Then he saw that the cold and vacuum hadn't killed the man. Over his heart a bullet wound showed that his life had ended before the crash.

Caryl straightened, remembering the words of Eve Daray: "There's murder here on this ship."

He moved on, walking at a crazy angle produced by the gravity of the station and the attempts of his own suit mechanism to adjust inside the ship.

IV

EVERYWHERE Caryl walked he saw evidence of disorder beyond the chaos of the wreck. Shattered glassware and pools of frozen alcohol littered the main salon. Here the distorted corpses of men and women in evening dress were heaped in the valley between floor and tilted wall. But in the terrible violence of the crash there was no way to assess the extent of the riot which had preceded it. Only the bullet pierced corpse in the corridor could testify to that.

He went on, looking for the engine room and the staterooms.

Suddenly he came to a sealed bulkhead that had knifed across a corridor. He felt a surge of hope—though for what, he did not know.

The bulkheads worked in triplicate, forming a lock in first class installations. Caryl saw that this was one. Behind him a door remained unclosed. He pressed the standard controls beside it, and slowly it drew shut. Then he turned the knob on the other seal. It slid back. A rush of warm, moist air frosted the lenses of his helmet for a moment. . . .

When he could see again, he closed the second door and moved on. He didn't yet dare test the atmosphere by opening his suit.

He saw that he was in the stateroom compartment. The first door was open

showing a luxurious chamber, unoccupied. Down the corridor, he tried the first closed door.

It opened at his touch. Inside lay the figures of two men. They were motionless, but not like the bloated, charred-looking things he had seen in other parts of the ship.

Approaching them for closer examination, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye.

On the bed against the far wall of the room a third figure lay grotesquely sprawled upon the sloping surface. And the figure moved. It turned over, and he saw the face of Eve Daray.

He moved quickly to the side of the bed and bent over. Blood matted the golden strands of hair and her face was bruised. Great welts stood out on her arms and legs.

But she was alive, and breathing still! He snapped open the helmet of his suit and threw it back against his shoulders. The air was good. Somewhere an auxiliary supply was working.

He touched Eve's swollen arms. She stirred and moaned, but slowly her eyes opened. One did, at least, the other being half closed by puffy, bruised flesh.

She struggled to sit up after a moment.

"Take it easy," said Caryl. "You'd better lie still until we can get some medical help for you."

"I don't need anything. I'm all right." She sat up and looked at him in wonder. "Who are you?"

"Robert Caryl from the repeater station you crashed into."

"I remember. I talked to you. You gave me permission to come in."

"What happened? Why did your ship ram us?"

She shook her head wearily as if to clear it. Blood started again from the wound on her head.

"It's a long story—too long to tell now." She whirled suddenly. "Dad—where's Dad?"

Caryl had all but forgotten the two men across the room. Then Eve was off the bed and running across the tipped floor towards one of them. She stumbled down beside him and turned him over, crying and choking out his name. "Dad—Dad—"

Caryl examined the other man, who was obviously dead also. He went over to Eve and raised her from the body of her father.

"Let's take care of you," he said gently, "and then you can tell me about it."

ABRUPTLY, Eve struggled out of his grasp. Her eyes took on an almost animal glow. She dropped beside the dead man and glared up at Caryl.

"Let me alone! I've killed him. The whole world knows I've killed him. Leave me alone, and let me die with him. There's no one else alive on this hell-ship, and I have no right to be, either."

"I'll give you three," said Caryl wearily. "If you aren't on your feet by then, I'll slap you until you are ready to come with me."

She glared up, like some fierce cub across the body of its dead parent.

"One—"

"Two—"

"Three—"

A bitter smile crept to her lips, turning their corners downward is if she knew he had been merely pretending.

Then his open palm crashed into her face.

The blow knocked her sidewise, sprawling her on the sloping floor. She raised on her elbows, her face twisting now with desperate inner agony.

"You must have a bathroom here somewhere," said Caryl, "where we can take a look at those cuts of yours. Yes, here. And where can we get the nearest spacesuit for you?"

She lay still, whimpering without moving. He stood over her. "If you don't get up I'll let you have it again."

Momentarily, she tried to build defiance again in her eyes, and his palm lifted. Then she broke and fell on her side in the shattering release of grief.

Gently now, Caryl raised her and she

did not resist. He led her to the bathroom where the faucets miraculously still ran hot and cold.

He washed her face and clipped the matted hair from her head. From a lone, unbroken bottle of antiseptic in the medicine kit, he treated the gash in her scalp and drew it together with absorbable tape.

"The medics couldn't do better," he pronounced as he finished painting the edges. This sealed in the protein nutrient that would heal the cut and knit it together within a matter of hours.

She sighed and slid down off the edge of the stool propped against the wall.

"Thanks," she said quietly. "Thanks a lot. I should think you'd have left me here after what I did."

He smiled genuinely for the first time and shook his head. "You're a human being, and a rather useful one, too."

"Useful! That's about the most senseless of all the descriptions that have ever been applied to me. Look at me; look at this ship. Useful—how stupid can you get?"

"I've seen your acting. I used to monitor your programs to Mars a long time ago when you—when we were both just beginning our careers. I was a rookie repeaterman on this very station, and I thought you were very good. Other people seem to agree with me."

She brushed her hair back over the aching gash on her head. "Yes, I suppose I am a good actress. But I often wonder what it would be like to be as good when I'm not acting."

"Let's get the suit for you. Then you can come to the station with me. We'll see what happens from then on."

"We ought to search the ship. There might be others who survived. Surely I am not the only one!"

SHE was right, and, familiar with the vessel, she speeded the search that had to be made. She seemed to take on new strength as she moved through the cracked and twisted hull.

They did find others. There were three men in the engine room and four guests in various staterooms. Some of them were too badly hurt to be moved far. It was a job for the medical crew, so all were brought to a single stateroom and the air supply adjusted to feed it alone. The enginemen said there was enough for a couple of days if necessary.

Having combed the ship thoroughly, Caryl and Eve Daray walked towards the lock by which he had first entered. They came to the corpse in the corridor. He touched it with the toe of his boot.

"I'd like to know about him," he said.

Eve looked closer. She saw the bullet wound and cried out. She backed away and stood a moment in terror, and then moved to Caryl's side, as if accepting the inevitable.

"Dad threatened to do it to him," she said, "but I never believed he would. And now we can never know for sure.

"But there wouldn't have been any one else with sufficient reason. It's good that Dad didn't live through it. He had been ready to go for a long time."

Robert Caryl said nothing. He didn't care to understand the complex intrigue and bitter hates that must have prevailed in this ship at the moment of its death. It would be an old pattern with only minor variations. There were only a few reasons for murder, and they had all been used before.

But he wondered what kind of a woman Eve Daray really was. Like others of her art, her name was bandied by irresponsible reporters who never knew and never cared to know the person behind the name. Was it possible that she was no more than this scene of revelry and murder and death intimated? He didn't know. Somehow, he wished he did.

They crawled carefully along the torn girders and through the ragged slash in the skin of the station. Then they were outside with only the stars above and the dead ship beneath their feet.

Eve gave a short gasp as she looked about. "I've never been out like this be-

fore. I didn't know it was like this!"

"I come out sometimes," said Caryl, "alone. At times the stars seem like the only friendly things in all the Universe."

"You and I better get together and swap notes sometime," said Eve. "That sounds like a pretty bitter commentary on your fellow men."

"My relations with my fellow men have been rather distant. My career—or ex-career—hasn't permitted much else."

"What do you mean, ex-career?"

"As Chief of the station I may be held responsible for its destruction by authorizing your ship to come in under circumstances forbidden by Company rules.

"I'm only waiting now for my replacement, which may be temporary—or permanent."

"Oh!—I'm terribly sorry! There's nothing good that comes of anything I do!"

"Please—" he said. "There's nothing to be done about it now. I see the medical ship has pulled up. I'll be needed inside. We'll have to see about help for the rest of your people, too."

V

IN SILENCE they walked along the metal wall of the station. He felt as if some of the dead shock was lifting from his mind just a little. He did not know if it came from the presence of Eve or whether it was the natural resilience of his mind. But there was a curious satisfaction in her presence, and he wondered how it could be.

They entered the lock by which he had left. He helped her off with her suit.

As they approached the lift shaft, he wondered what had become of Kerns, whose wife had been locked behind the bulkhead. The man was no longer there.

In the switchroom the scene had changed. Most of the people had been moved to quarters or first aid points. Members of the medical crew were visible through open doors of adajacent offices as they worked over injured crewmen and their families.

Small knots of crewmen not assigned at the moment remained about the main switchroom, and wives who saw no need to keep out of the technical area now were there, too. Kramer was lax, Caryl thought. He would never make an administrator.

He felt curious glances as he strode through the room, as if he had been gone a long time and they had not really expected him back.

Kramer was sitting at the desk speaking swiftly now and then through the mike, flipping switches to carry his voice to various parts of the station. He looked up as Caryl approached.

"Give me a picture of the situation now," said Caryl. "Do the medics have adequate facilities?"

Kramer hesitated. Without meaning to let it do so, his glance darted across the room to his left, towards the private office of the Station Chief. Caryl whirled in the direction of that glance.

Hawkins was sitting there at the desk.

"He came in on the medical ship," said Kramer miserably. "I told him you'd be back in a few minutes, but he just took over."

Caryl turned, cancelling his questions to Kramer. He moved towards the door of his office like a man in a dream. Wiley had told him this was coming, but he hadn't known what it would be like.

And suddenly, every man and woman in the room was aware of that slow march across the switchroom—the stern man they half-admired and half-hated, and the strange girl who walked by his side, who was recognized by few of them as the great actress, Eve Daray.

Caryl came to the edge of the door and stood with his hand on the edge of it. He watched the man sitting at his desk, stirring through his papers, using his phone.

And then Hawkins looked up.

His glance was wary for an instant, as if there was a trace of fear in him. Then it was gone, and his face was bland.

"Hello, Robert. I missed you when I came in. They told me you were surveying the ship. Are things bad down there?"

Caryl felt trapped by the round-faced man on the other side of the desk. *His* desk! He stood watching Hawkins, restraining the impulse to jerk him bodily out of the chair.

Hawkins sensed the impulse, but he smiled slowly in the face of it. Caryl's only hope of favorable judgement by the committee depended upon acting rationally at this moment. They both knew it, and Hawkins considered Caryl's case already hopeless. But he knew Caryl would not risk his slim hopes by refusing to surrender his administrative authority.

Caryl approached the desk slowly, resting his knuckles on the polished wood. "Things are pretty bad," he said.

"All but eight of the ship's people are dead. Some of the survivors need immediate help. I'll send a team of the medics back down there."

HAWKINS shook his head. "Our own people have priority on all medical aid available. Those aboard the ship will have to wait for the final medical crew."

"Then some of our own best First Aid Men can be sent. They can take emergency measures until—"

"Let us understand each other," said Hawkins icily. "I did not ask for this job. I was assigned by Mr. Wiley to come over here under the very difficult circumstances that exist. It is my intention to do the best job I can, in whatever way I see fit. For the moment that does not include asistance to those responsible for the destruction of the station.

"And the job *does* include complete administrative authority here!"

Caryl opened his mouth to speak, then closed it slowly.

At last he said. "May I inquire if there is an assignment for me?"

Hawkins shook his head again. "It was specifically requested that you refrain from any activity involving the station, until official surveys of the damage have been completed. You will be careful about your movements throughout the station, not to intrude upon areas where investigations are progressing. The Patrol has been called in—"

"Did Wiley order my arrest?" Caryl exploded.

"No," said Hawkins smoothly. "Not exactly. They want to be sure, however, that you remain for the investigation and that no significant factor in the disaster is altered.

"I'm sorry, Robert. There's not a thing I can do. You have the freedom of the station, of course, but I have to ask you not to interfere with the work of rescue and repair."

It seemed to Caryl as if some great curtain had lowered and he was now alone on some gigantic stage. He felt a crazy impulse to run and hide—and cry. . . .

As he turned back to the switchroom, the watching groups averted their eyes, but not before he caught their intense stares. He felt as if he were a wounded pack leader, and the pack had turned. . . .

He moved on out into the corridor, Eve at his side. With the door shut behind them, he seemed to notice her for the first time.

He leaned against the wall and stared at her. "That's what it must be like when the audience walks out on you."

"Something like it, I guess."

"Only you get another try. There won't be another play for me. In this business you blow everything on one performance. When you're out, you're through."

"You still have the hearing, you said. You don't know that it's all over."

"There's no use kidding myself. I know what the committee will do. I know what I would have to do if I were in their place!"

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. There's a cop down that corridor. He's watching to see that I don't blow up the rest of the station."

"Let's go back to the ship. They need us—and everything is being taken care of here."

"Quite beautifully—it's being taken care of quite beautifully. All right, let's go. I'll go crazy standing around here with the cops watching me. I don't suppose they'll object if I put on a spacesuit again."

CARYL felt like a swimmer engulfed in waters beyond his strength. He had never been in the position of having his destiny wholly dependent upon the judgement of others, while he remained bound and immobile. But it was that way now. There was nothing for him—nothing but to wait.

And he could not wait in the station. He had to get away from it, where his former subordinates glanced with casual speculation upon his career and its possible duration.

He showed Eve how to use the weightless shafts to lower herself by the chain. He went first, and on the way down halted midway.

"What's wrong?" asked Eve, nervous.

"Let's stop here a minute," he said. "I'd like to see something again. I'd like you to see it."

She followed curiously as he left the shaft and went into a room lined with banks of equipment, each unit of which was centered by a video screen.

He went toward one of the positions near the door.

"This is where I first saw you," he said. "This is where I sat. Thirteen years ago I sat here and watched your programs relaying to Mars."

He took her hand gently and led her to a point beside the screen and then sat down in the monitor's position.

"You were playing in Othello the first time I saw you, and then there was Hamlet. After that there was something modern; I've forgotten what it was.

"You were useful then—to me and a few million other people. You made the world a little more real by your make-believe."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could do that *without* the make-believe?"

He was made uneasy by her constant self-deprecation, but he smiled to her face. "Maybe you can," he said. "Maybe you can."

They returned to the shaft and dropped to the lowest level. There, they donned the suits again and made their way to the outside of the station.

They went through the lock of the *Solar Star,* which Caryl had not closed previously. They passed the corpse again and Eve looked at Caryl wonderingly.

"I wonder if you couldn't—"

He shook his head. "It would stay in the vicinity of the station by gravity attraction. The Patrol would find it anyway. Who was he?"

"My husband," said Eve.

A nausea plummeted through Caryl. He stared down at the black, bloated figure. He tried to imagine it in life, tried to think of it as a live something, a human being who had loved Eve—

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he said.

She shrugged in her spacesuit, but he could feel the grief in her voice even through the frequency clipping of the radio sets. They moved down the corridor as she spoke.

"There's almost nothing to tell. Don married me for the specific purpose of getting his hands into Dad's busines. He succeeded very well, and drove Dad almost to the point of suicide. Then during the party aboard ship Dad got drunk and threatened to kill Don. That's when I called you. I knew that he would do it if someone didn't intervene, and the Patrol was too far away. None of the rest of them here had guts enough to take Dad seriously or do anything about it if they did. You see the results."

"How did the ship ram the station? What caused the crash?"

"Don was in a rage and said he was going to wreck the ship and kill us all. The rest of them were just as drunk as

he was and thought it was a good joke. They egged him on.

"He went up to the control room with a gun and started shooting wildly as we were coming into the station. He must have knocked out the controls. The crew tried to get him, but he escaped down that corridor towards the lock. He tripped the bulkheads so that they were delayed, and that's when we crashed."

VI

ROBERT CARYL whirled towards her. "But how did your father shoot him, then? How did he get back to the stateroom?"

Eve smiled wanly through the thick window of the suit. "Maybe if I wasn't so groggy I could have made it fit together better. I've been trying ever since I woke up, but I just can't make it."

"What do you mean?"

"I shot him."

"Eve—!"

"Oh, don't say it that way. I didn't love him. I never had. And I'm not sorry he's dead. The world is better off without him. But I suppose the world will feel it's better off without me, too, when the Patrol catches up with me."

"Surely your shooting was justifiable after what he did. The survivors can verify your story, can't they?"

"Yes. But you see I didn't have to kill him. When he was running down the corridor he stumbled and fell. His head hit on a wall and he was knocked out. I was already on that side of the bulkhead looking for him. I turned him over—and shot him. . . .

"I told you there was murder aboard this ship. I didn't tell you it was in my own heart."

Caryl felt the silence and stillness of space about them as Eve finished speaking. She had exposed a world that he could not comprehend.

Then she was crying, and her voice began to break with rage and terrible self-justification. "I hated him! He was everything in the world that was vile and evil. The thing I did was not evil—only cowardly!"

Caryl held her arm as he led her through the bulkhead locks. He could feel her trembling through the thick fabric of the suit as they came into the atmosphere of the ship.

"I opened the bulkheads and ran back here as fast as I could. Dad and my brother followed me out of the salon where they had been. The ship crashed just as we got to the stateroom. I recovered enough once to crawl up on the bed, but I didn't know anything more until you came in.

"And that's the story of the *Solar Star* and the story of Eve Daray."

In the corridor outside the stateroom, they took off the suits once more and surveyed each other with new recognition. She needn't have told him the story, he thought. It would scarcely have been suspected that she killed her husband after he fell. She had told him because she had to have judgement upon her.

She watched as if asking what he would do with the story now that he knew. She was watching as if for the judgement which she had assigned him to give.

And he began to understand just a little the thing she had meant when she expressed her longing to be useful for herself alone instead of only for the worlds of make-believe which she could create.

He could not escape giving his evaluation after her damning revelation. He held her life in his hands at this moment, and a shift of his hand or the muscles of his face could crush it.

"I'm sure it's not all of the story of Eve Daray," he said quietly. "There will be much more of her story—and it will be far better than what has gone before."

Almost imperceptibly there was a release within her. It came with the slow exhalation of her breath. He saw

it in the glance of her eyes, and he felt it in her arm, which he held again.

THEY went into the stateroom to see what could be done about the injured there. They explained the delay of medical aid and turned to the ship's own medical stores to do what could be done for the most seriously injured.

Eve's hands were quick and sure, and she seemed to have an intuitive sense of precise needs. Caryl watched in admiration as she bound the wounds and made her crewmen and guests as comfortable as possible.

They rustled food from the galley, which had to be done in suits since the air was gone from it. They brought back an electric heater and utensils and a stock of cans which had not yet exploded in the vacuum.

The stateroom was divided later, and beds unbolted and dragged from other rooms and propped level until, barracks-like, the room could accommodate them all.

There was no reason for Caryl to return to the station so he prepared to remain on the ship overnight.

When the others were bedded down, there was still no sleep for Caryl or Eve. But he thought she had gone to bed and wandered out into the corridor to find it lighted and Eve sitting on a sofa which she had pushed out and leveled at one end.

She was dressed in a robe that was bulky and rough and completely concealing, but his eyes caught the sight of the clean pink flesh of her feet revealed between the edge of the robe and the frivolous slippers she wore. There was something so sensuous about this that it shocked him.

What had happened to him through the years, he wondered? There were women about the station—the wives of the other men. But he had never sat beside any of them as he now sat beside Eve. There had been none whom he could call *his* friend — even with the doubtful possessiveness with which he had spoken of "his station." But he almost felt now that Eve was such a one.

"If you are to lose your station I wish there were something I could say or do to make up for it," she said. "There isn't, of course. But it would be brutal to force the blame upon you and take away the thing you love because of it."

He looked into her face and smiled slowly, almost easily. "I don't love it. I hate it. I've always hated it. But it was all I could do. That was the only reason I was here, and I drove as high and as fast as I could because I hated it and wanted to wring the most out of it."

"What will you do if you have to leave here?"

"I don't know. I haven't the least idea —unless they press criminal charges."

"Oh, no! They couldn't do that!"

"I.C. has done worse. It's like an animal with a thousand claws and an invisible head. And it's the policy of the Company to discharge whatever responsible official is involved in accidents of even far less magnitude than this."

"But it doesn't have to be like that."

"I don't know. I don't know whether it does or not. I was one of the claws of the monster for so long that I don't know any other way it could function."

He wondered how he could be sitting here talking like this to Eve, a stranger. How could he be expressing at last the thousand rebellions he had fought down over the years? But she was not a stranger to him. That made the difference. She was an old friend from those nights long ago in the monitoring room. She had spoken her heart then, and he understood fully the girl who was Eve.

"But you said you hated it," she said. "Why did you stay? What would you do if you had a free choice?"

He shook his head slowly. "It is much too late for that. It was always too late for me, right from the beginning."

She persisted. "What would you do?"

"What would I do?" He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the sofa. "When I was a little kid I dreamed of solving the mystery of the

wave packet, of finding the last defining particle of the atom. I dreamed of wrapping the Universe in a single equation that would stand for all time. I imagined myself sliding down the curvature of space itself, or boring through to see what fantastic realms might lie beyond."

CARYL opened his eyes and grinned at her. "I was quite an imaginative character then."

"And now?"

"I'm a very practical one. If you want to live, you have to eat, and to eat you have to work like hell."

"At something you hate?"

He nodded. "Most of us do. There aren't many people lucky enough to be doing the things they would like to do in life."

"And for you that would be—?"

"Hell, it would be the things I told you—brought down to Earth, of course. A kid's dreams aren't all false. They are the first wavy outlines of the things that could be—"

"And so you would be a scientist, researching into the deepest problems of the Universe."

"If I had the brains—and the guts."

"Don't you?"

"They told me I did when I was in school. I had one old math prof who patted me on the back the day I left school. I'd swear there were tears in his eyes, and he said, 'The world needs that brain of yours, Robert.' I guess he thought I had something. He was a pretty smart character himself."

"What stopped you?"

"What stops anybody? Money. My Dad died. His business went broke. I had a mother and a couple of sisters to support. I applied for a repeaterman's job with good old I.C. and got it. Since then, Mom died and the kids got married, so I haven't got them any more.

"But for me things go on the same way they always did. Until now, that is. No telling what will happen now."

"But is it too late to be the thing you wanted to be—if there were a way to return to your studies and research?"

"Hell, yes! Of course it is. I'm an old man of almost thirty five. What chance do you think I'd have getting back there again?"

"But you would if you could?"

"What are you trying to do? Make me unhappy for the rest of my life?"

Eve smiled happily and yawned and looked away, stretching her slender arms above her head. "I think I'll turn in," she said. "How about you?"

He nodded. "I'll take the sofa here. All the space on the men's side in there is taken up."

He lay awake on the sofa in the corridor. The stateroom door was open and he could se through the ports to space beyond, outlined by torn steel. The stars were cold and steady points of light.

He thought of the things he had said to Eve. He did not understand her prodding him with her insistent questions. It made no difference to her what his dreams and hopes had been.

Once this mess was cleared they would likely never meet again. In this moment of stress and crisis there seemed to be a bond of affinity spinning about them, but when it was over they would again be in separate worlds where they would never meet.

He did wonder a little what would become of him, but his head was too weary to concern itself any more with the question. His chance of remaining with I.C. was slim indeed. They would not have sent Hawkins, otherwise.

His icy slaving of fifteen years was wiped out and nothing would remain of his hopes of being called into the home office where he might have a chance to live as a human being instead of a machine.

He didn't care much. It hadn't been worth it. He had paid a high price for what he thought was security. He should have broken somewhere—before the break was made for him.

He hadn't been wrong when he told Eve it was too late to pick up the dreams he'd once held. But he couldn't get the

picture of old Profesor James out of his mind. The mathematician was one person who'd believed in him. Caryl himself had felt like crying the day he'd had to leave the old man's class forever.

James had preached to him the power of epistemology over empiricism. "Mere tinkerers," he used to call the lab men who peered and measured and boiled and weighed. He'd tap his own bony skull and remark, "Here is the tool to find out the Universe. Yours is a mighty tool, Robert Caryl. It can't go to waste."

It was nice to have someone believe in your dreams even after you no longer believed in them yourself.

VII

MORNING was revealed only by the clock, which flashed on the lights to rouse them from sleep. Caryl helped Eve take care of the injured and prepare breakfast. Then he went outside to see if the other medical crews had arrived.

When he climbed up through the broken webbing to the surface of the station, it appeared as if a fleet had come in during the night. There were the two medical ships from 10 and 30. There was a huge salvage boat of the Patrol's besides the company one from 29. These were already swinging to position to separate the *Solar Star* from the station.

And there was a fancy administrative ship from the Home Office. It was one of the new Second Order jobs. Caryl whistled grimly as he saw it. The high brass were really out to settle this fast.

As he stood on the edge of the rent he could see the flashing lights of exploring crews weaving through the dark, open wreckage of the station. He ought to be supervising that. He ought to know what was going on.

After much of the shock had worn off, it seemed an incredible injustice that Hawkins had been sent to take over. Caryl knew he had the right to fair investigation, and the right to carry on station administration until that investigation was completely carried out.

Sending Hawkins damned him with implied incompetency without the hearing. Yet, a corporation the size of I.C. could scarcely concern itself with fairness to a single employee.

Perhaps they were justified in questioning his ability after such a disaster, but when Eve told her story—and he was certain she would be called upon to tell it—it would be apparent to the committee that he was not at fault, that the ship would probably have rammed regardless of his permission, since it was moving in the direction of the station anyway.

He felt better as he reasoned this out. It might not mean the end of his career, after all.

He returned to the interior of the station. Wiley and the rest of the committee were already in his office with Hawkins. The door was open and they saw him as he approached and turned away.

Wiley came out and beckoned. "Come on in, Robert. We were about to send for you."

He nodded and shook hands as he came to the door. His eyes searched Wiley's for some clue as to the disposition of the committee but he found none. The gray eyes beneath the sloping forehead were friendly, but it was the corporation friendliness with which Caryl was so familiar. The friendliness that could turn off like a faucet if a man suffered a demotion or dropped out of his salary class.

"Sit down, Robert, and let's see if we can get this thing straightened out. We'd like you to start from the beginning and tell us just how it came about that the *Solar Star* was approaching the station."

He told them again. He told of the radio call and the request of Eve Daray. He tried to picture for them the scene of disaster when he knew the ship was out of control and about to crash.

They questioned him and took down his answers on tape, and they made him

thoroughly repeat the story over and over.

And then Wiley said, "Can you explain to the committee just why you gave authorization for the ship to approach when no indication had been given that she was unspaceworthy?"

"I assumed that desperate personnel trouble existed, and that we might be able to save lives. That this assumption was justified is shown by her father's threat of murder against her husband, and her husband's going berserk in the control room."

"Were you not aware of a Patrol ship course less than an hour away?"

"I am aware of their orbits and schedules, of course. But I assumed they were much too distant, in view of the emergency situation that existed. I was correct in this, also."

"But you were also aware that it is not the duty of station personnel to act as arbiters in matters that can best be referred to the Patrol? Were you not aware that the property of the Company and the lives of your crewmen and families were to be weighed against the minor number of persons aboard this private yacht?"

"Of course," said Caryl wearily. "I made a decision based on the assumption that we have an obligation to save human life wherever it is threatened. There was no prior knowledge, of course, that the ship might go out of control."

There was a moment's silence while Wiley looked about the circle of committeemen. They shook their heads in answer to his glance that questioned whether they wished to know more.

"Will you please have Miss Daray come in?" said Wiley then.

"She has no obligation," Caryl reminded him, "unless this is set up as an authorized court of law."

"It is not, of course. That may come later. But we are merely a Company committee, and I think Miss Daray has some obligation to assist our inquiry. Will you request her to come?"

WHILE Eve was with the committee Caryl walked through the corridors and the vast automatic switchrooms of the station. Workmen from the emergency crews were everywhere, swarming over the equipment, revising, rerouting, repairing. Some of them knew him from other days, and these nodded politely. But they knew he was no longer giving orders they had to obey.

There was a dreamlike sense of detachment from all this that was once so familiar to him. His own crew members nodded as they passed—nodded with perfunctoriness that verged on the They had worked and obeyed him because it was their job. Now, they had no further obligation towards him, but they were careful to avoid the absolute show of insolence against the meager chance that he might be given back his former authority.

He saw Kramer directing a crew rerouting power leads and stood by him.

"How bad is it? Has the survey been completed?" he asked.

Kramer nodded. Too politely, Caryl thought. "Power is completely gone. We'll have to run on auxiliaries from the emergency ships if we want to go back in service before the lower levels are repaired. One and Two switchrooms are completely gone—entirely new rebuilding will be called for there. But the living quarters are the ones hit worst about that level."

"How many dead altogether?"

"Seventy eight at last count. Only your quick order to gather in the switchroom kept it from being four or five times that number."

Caryl hesitated a moment before going on, then faced Kramer squarely. "They blame me for those deaths, don't they? They think I made a blunder in asking the *Solar Star* to come in."

"Of course they don't blame you for the deaths. Not directly, anyway. They do think it was an error to bring the ship in. It's been drilled into us often enough that any ship but our own is to keep its distance. No one knows exact-

ly why you brought this one in. Maybe if you offered some reason—?"

Caryl shook his head. "I'm not making excuses for my own blunders. I've never allowed them any, and I'm not begging for any for myself now. I just wanted to know how they felt."

Robert Caryl watched through the transparent ports of the bulkheads that closed off the sections of the station open to space. In them, suited figures were far into the work of cutting out the damaged sections. Heavy power machinery was being moved out through new gaps cut in the skin plates. Soon they would be tackling the job of moving the ship.

He went back up to the main switchroom. Eve was waiting for him.

"They want to see you again," she said.

He went into the office that he had once called his own. The committee seemed darker of face and more weary of their deliberations. Wiley took up a sheet of paper and glanced down at it.

"Sit down, Robert," he asked.

Caryl took the chair across the desk from him. He thought curiously how reversed the situation was from the many times when he had been forced to reprimand some crewman for an infraction of rules. And suddenly he knew what was going to happen. There was no escape from the inevitable.

Interplanetary Communications would go on. Its rules were inexorable. He had identified himself as an irreplaceable part of the vast organization. He had thought of himself as I.C. personified. But he let Wiley say it—

"No criminal charges will be brought," said Wiley, "in view of the fact that the actual source of error resulting in the crash appears to have been solely aboard the *Solar Star* itself.

"It is necessary, however, that the Company ask for your resignation in view of the magnitude of the disaster which the committee holds would not have occurred if you had not violated the Company's regulations regarding the approach of private vessels under such circumstances as these."

WILEY stood up. "Passage to Earth will be provided. You will be expected to leave at once."

Then he reached out a hand across the desk. "I'm sorry, Robert. I'm sorry this happened. There is nothing that is in our power to do, except that which we have done."

Robert Caryl looked at the hand a moment, then grasped it as if his career had not been suddenly wiped out. He grasped Wiley's hand as if they were a couple of sportsmen, and he had just been defeated in a friendly game.

That's what their code called for, but he knew that some of *them* had jumped out of the nearest window after such a blow as this.

He wasn't going to jump out of any window. He didn't know what he was going to do, but it wouldn't be that.

Eve fell into step beside him as he left the office. "It's no good telling you I'm sorry," she said. "What happens next?"

He looked dismally around the switchroom. The crewmen on duty were looking at him again, turning to avoid his eyes the moment he looked up.

He was not I.C. any more, and no longer one of them. He stopped abruptly at the exit door. Where was he going? There was no place to go. Absolutely no place. There was no place for him aboard the station. The *Solar Star* was being torn out and broken up.

"I've got to pack," he said. "They'll take me back to Earth with them. Your things—didn't anybody get them off the ship for you before they started work on it?"

Eve shook her head. "I guess no one thought of it. They took the others aboard the medical ship. It doesn't matter. I can sleep in what I've got on until I get home. Can I go with you on the company ship?"

"I don't know. We'll have to ask

Wiley. It would be as easy as taking you on the medical ship."

VIII

IT WAS agreeable with Wiley that Eve should go on the committee ship. Faster, it would get to Earth in less than a day. They left that same afternoon.

Aboard the ship, Robert Caryl and Eve felt the same aura of ostracism that prevailed at the station. They kept to each other's company in one of the small observation lounges in the lower part of the vessel.

As the station fell away in the ship's swift flight, Eve and Robert watched it disappear. When it was gone she turned slowly to him.

"You never answered the last question I asked you back there on the *Solar Star*," she said. "Won't you answer it for me now?"

"What question? What are you talking about?"

"You told me what you would have done with your life if you had been able. I asked you if you would still do it if you could."

He looked away towards the port, his mouth turning to bitterness.

"*That.* I'd rather not talk about it any more. I've got to think about getting some kind of a job to keep alive, at least—as if that were really necessary."

"What do you think you will do?"

"I don't know! It's rough trying to find something after an outfit like I.C. cans you. I know. Some of the boys I've let go have asked me to help them get new berths.

"I might try for Mars eventually. They say there's a lot of room for technicians there, and they aren't too fussy about a man's past history."

"But that would not be what you want."

"No. I don't ever expect to get what I want." He turned away from her again. "I don't want to think about it. I wish you'd stop talking about the crazy things I told you. It's nothing but a kid's dream. Forget I ever said anything!"

"Don't you suppose I had such dreams when I was a kid, too?"

He turned back, smiling wryly. "I should think that just about all your dreams have come true. You've made yourself the envy of all other actresses. Nobody can top you on the stage. What more do you want?"

"I'm talking about the other things. The stories that come over the channels even to Mars, where the latest escapade of Eve Daray is news. Those aren't part of my dream."

He had seen them. This marriage that had ended in murder was only one of so many.

"Why do you do the things that you don't want to do?" he asked.

She smiled suddenly, almost viciously. "That what *you* ask! Why do any of us do the things we don't want to do? I can answer it for myself. I'll tell you why: I get scandalously drunk. I snarl up the lives of people who come near me. I have married men that I hate—

"I'm no good, Robert. That's why I do these things. Eve Daray has never done a good thing in her life. But now —I think maybe I could."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got money, Robert. All the money you could ever need. With it we could buy your future, the kind of a life you want. You could take up your study where you left off. You could spend your life in the research you want to do."

THE light of the stars was almost the only light on her face in this dark side of the ship, but he could see the lines and intensity of her expression. Her face shocked him, because he knew she meant the things she said.

"That's hardly the way I would want to get it under any circumstances," he said. "I would hardly like to be another of your adventures."

"Don't try to insult me," she said softly with a smile. "You can't do it. I know what I'm doing."

"Why should you offer to do that for me? What would you be buying for yourself?"

She moved to the port and stood with her face close to the plastic. Her hands rested against the wall on either side.

"I'd be buying perhaps the first bit of decency I've known for a long time," she said. "It would be a useful and worthwhile thing to weigh against all the waste of my life."

"But why me? There are other charitable objects whose need might be more obvious than mine."

She turned and came closer, smiling in the starlight. "I told you that you couldn't insult me. Robert, don't you know why I want to do it?"

"No."

He backed away as she neared him, and he felt the weight of her arms on his shoulders. But he didn't break the clasp of her hands behind his head. His hands closed upon her cold arms.

"You've been in love with me all your life, Robert."

His breath sucked in sharply. "How did you know that?"

"It's my business to portray emotion, and I can read it in the faces of others as well as reveal it in my own. When you took me to the monitoring room and asked me to stand by the plate you told me all I needed to know." where you had watched me years ago,

"What did I tell you?"

"You told me that you were young and ambitious then and you were lonely and afraid of others because they could hurt you. And you told me that watching me on the screen was a kind of dream to which you returned each duty watch. You told me that you loved me for the part I had in your dreams. You told me that's the reason you let my ship come in—the only reason."

He dropped his hands to his sides, but she remained near him.

"What do men fall in love with?" he said. "Their own dreams? A tiny part of you was my dream. I watched the lights and shadows that were your image and listened to the sound of your voice. But that was all so long ago and so far away that it seems as if it never happened."

"I was never the girl you dreamed I was. I never have been. You know that. But—but maybe I could come close to it. Robert, with your help I could be!"

"Eve, you're not in love with me."

"I could be—it would take so little. Let me do something with my life that I won't be ashamed of."

He drew her arms away from his shoulders now and moved away. He faced the stars, as if in them he could read some sensible answer for this fantastic proposal, but they were coldly noncommittal.

IT HAD to be his answer—and the strangest part at the moment seemed that he should consider it at all. He could not go through the rest of his life leaning on a woman's support, one who was wholly a stranger to him only a matter of hours before.

But Eve was not a stranger, he reminded himself again. That was what made the answer hang in doubt. With perception whose sharpness was painful, she had read in his face and eyes the whole story of those early years on the station when he had fought with every legitimate weapon to rise to the hierarchy of I.C.

She had read in it the futility of what he was doing, working far afield from the things he would have loved.

But most of all, she had read correctly the inner loneliness that had haunted those nights in the monitoring room. She had read correctly his youthful adoration of her.

He knew that what he had loved then was only a dream. The real woman here beside him was far different than the things he had dreamed of her. She was human, and wealth and talent had not

saved her from the errors of impulse and vague purpose. Her life was at best a thing of turmoil and confusion.

He was aware of her standing close beside him. His arm went about her and he felt her trembling and knew that she was afraid—afraid, he thought, of his refusal, and afraid of his acceptance.

He understood then the courage that it had taken to offer the bargain she held out to him.

She was not the woman he had fallen in love with. She was a far better person than the Eve who had been merely a thing of lights and shadow—the substance of a dream—on those nights of monitoring duty so many years ago. She was real and she was full of a kind of courage that the other Eve would never have possessed.

"I'm beginning to understand what you have said," he said slowly. "But it's too big a question for either of us to answer all at once. We need time to think it through."

"I've had time," said Eve, "but while you're thinking, I want you to think of the things that we'll both become if we separate when this trip is over.

"You'll find some kind of a job. It won't be much with the discharge from I.C. on your record, but you'll find one, and live the rest of your life knowing you have never done the thing you should have been doing.

"I want you to think of me, too. I'll go on the way I have. I'm no good. Alone, I haven't the strength to change. It would take something much greater than myself to make decent living possible or even worth while for me. With Dad gone now, it's worse than it ever was.

"Apart, neither of us will ever again achieve anything worth while. Together, we *might* be able to make all our dreams come true. I think it's worth trying, Robert Caryl."

He listened to her words, and knew it was true. He would do exactly as she said. And she would continue being a tramp the rest of her life. He sensed it in her, the weakness that he knew he had the power to block.

He suddenly found himself chuckling as if with some inner pleasure he could not define. If this were some kind of trap it could have been no more perfect than it was. Eve's logic was irrefutable —and he found himself without any desire to refute it.

For any other two people in the whole world it would have been a wild and senseless bargain. But for them it was right. He knew that it was. He bent down and kissed her lightly to let her know.

In the Next Issue—

The author of the hilarious Draco Manning stories has doffed the role of jester and written a gripping novelet of suspense which is given new and unsuspected depths by his gift of sardonic irony. Suppose you were a high politician judged no longer useful to the tight little oligarchy which ran your country. Suppose you saw your death notice already published and knew you were expected to commit suicide or be liquidated by a professional assassin. Would you meekly submit—or fight? Whom would you fight, how would you fight? Read next issue's brilliant complete novelet—

THE HOUR OF THE MORTALS

by KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

MR. CIRCE

By MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

Lem Higgins had a wonderful talent— but unfortunately it undid a lot of people!



LEMUEL HIGGINS first discovered his awful gift when he was twelve.

He was hurrying through his summer chores on the farm so that he could go fishing in the river with the other kids. The pest, his baby brother Albert, who was four, was making it twice as hard as it needed to be by tagging him around and getting in his way. Albert was a roly-poly youngster, always eating when he wasn't whining. Lem had cached his fishing tackle and a package of lunch for a quick getaway; and here all of a sudden he caught Albert wolfing down one of his cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches.

Lem rushed over, bale in his eye.

"Cut that out!" he yelled. "Get out of here. You're nothing but a darned little pig."

And then all at once Albert wasn't there. What was there was a small Poland China pig.

Lemuel rubbed his eyes, looked around wildly, and called, "Hey, Albert!" in an unconvincing voice.

The piglet said, "Oink."

Scared to death, Lem dashed around frantically, looking for Albert. There was no Albert anywhere.

In a daze of fright, Lemuel grabbed his tackle and what was left of the lunch and ran, before anybody else began calling for Albert. He didn't go fishing; he hid out in the woods instead, and it was deep dark before he summoned up courage to drag himself home again. All the way he kept telling himself that he would find the pest sound asleep in the bedroom they shared.

Before he got well out of the woods he saw lights and heard people shouting. At the edge of the south field he stumbled into his father. Pa grabbed him by the shoulder and blew a police whistle he'd got from somewhere. A lot of men came running up—neighbors, and State Police in uniform.

"Where's your brother?" Pa cried. His voice was hoarse. "I've found one of them," he said to the men. "Isn't Albert with you?" He shook Lemuel hard, and Lem was so exhausted, bewildered, and terrified that he burst into tears.

It was a hunt that made the first page of papers all over the country. The river was dragged and the woods were fine-tooth combed and fourteen men and women were arrested in three states

and questioned and let go. But they never saw Albert again.

Nobody thought of looking in the sty where a Poland China sow had farrowed recently. One of the police, who almost fell over a little pig in the barnyard, picked it up and threw it in with the rest. In the morning Lemuel sneaked over and stared desperately at the litter, but they all looked alike. Of course there was one more than there had been, but in the excitement nobody thought of that, and Lemuel certainly wasn't going to mention it.

Understandably, he couldn't make himself eat pork, ham, or bacon for years afterwards.

THAT dreadful shock made him grow older fast. He turned into an unsociable boy who spent most of his time reading and studying when he wasn't working around the farm, and in consequence he was graduated from high school at the top of his class and won a scholarship to the university.

The only subject he had trouble with was zoology. He was afraid to utter the names of animals, and had to devise elaborate evasions when it was necessary to mention one. In college he majored in mathematics, which was the safest subject he could think of.

Lemuel liked college. He was beginning at last to get over things; Albert's metamorphosis was no longer a constant horror, but a softened memory that might have been some crazy thing that had happened to somebody else. The only unpleasant aspect of his life at the university was George Gruber, his roommate in the men's dormitory.

George was a nasty piece of work; he hardly ever took a bath, he cribbed all his lessons from Lem or anybody else he could get hold of. He prided himself on his talent for sharp practices and cutting corners; and with all that he wasn't even amiable, but was as disagreeable and quarrelsome a human being as Lemuel had ever met.

Lemuel didn't want trouble. He kept his mouth shut and stood everything, comforting himself with the thought that next year he might have better luck. Then one morning he came home unexpectedly, and caught George Gruber going through his trunk.

White with cumulative rage, Lem bellowed: "Let my things alone! I thought I'd been missing stuff! Get out of here before I kick you out, you dirty rat!"

George Gruber vanished.

But a big slinking rat, its teeth bared, snarled at him from beside the trunk.

In a panic Lemuel ran from the dormitory. He hid out in an upstairs alcove of the library, trying to control his racing heart and quivering muscles. When he forced himself to his next class, his hands still shook.

It was evening before he could make himself go back to his room. The door was still wide open as he had left it. Everything was unchanged. He sat up all night, afraid to go to bed. But there was no sign of George.

The next day the dean of men sent for Lemuel. Lem went, his teeth chattering, firmly resolved never to divulge the truth. His resolution was unnecessary. The dean told him that he was being assigned a new roommate. George Gruber, it seemed, had disappeared the morning before.

"And just in time, too," the dean said grimly. "He evidently got word that he was to be expelled. There have been complaints of thefts of money and valuables, and they were traced to Gruber. Did he ever steal anything of yours?"

"N-no, sir," said Lem.

"Too risky, I suppose, stealing from his own roommate. The boy should never have been admitted. I'll have his things packed up and sent to his people, but I doubt very much if they or we will ever hear from him again. A thoroughly bad egg, I'm afraid; we don't get many of them, but it's inevitable once in a while.

"And Higgins, keep this completely to yourself, will you? It doesn't do the

university any good to have an affair like this come out. So keep the whole thing confidential, please."

"Oh, yes sir," said Lem fervently.

THE next night the girls' dormitory was set in an uproar when a huge rat ran over somebody's sleeping face. Such a thing had never been heard of before. An exterminator was called at once to ratproof the building. The rat was not found; it was supposed that it had escaped back to the town, from which it must have come. In the hurry-skurry Gruber's disappearance was forgotten; nobody liked him, anyway.

In Lemuel's senior year the war started. He was drafted, pronounced 1-A, and sent to training camp. He had hoped to finish college first, but there it was and he made the best of it. He got on well with his fellow recruits, and avoided any trouble from above.

That is, until he ran into Corporal Wilkes.

Corporal Wilkes was regular army, with four hash marks. He had been broken twice to private and got his rank back again the hard way. He didn't like citizen soldiers, he disliked draftees even more than enlisted men, and above all he hated, despised, and abhorred drafted college students. The men reciprocated in exactly that order: the enlisted soldiers disliked him, the draftees abominated him. Lemuel was the only college student in his squad: their mutual utter detestation found its focal point in him.

For eight weeks Corporal Wilkes rode Lemuel Higgins. He sneered at him, he barked at him, he threatened him, he browbeat him. Lem took it with gritted teeth. The squad waited expectantly and with confidence for the break.

It came in the middle of drill, on a broiling hot morning.

"Never in all my born days," bayed Corporal Wilkes, "have I seen such a bunch of dumb—clumsy—stoopid—hopeless—impossible dubs. A saint in heaven couldn't make soldiers out of you. And the worst of the whole lot—here, step out, you. Joe Collitch!"

Nobody moved.

"You—what do you call yourself, you misbegotten mistake of nature — Higgins!"

Lem stepped out.

"Ten-shun!" roared Corporal Wilkes.

Lemuel stood at attention.

"Do you call yourself a soldier?" the corporal shouted.

"Yes, sir—no, sir," murmured Lem, confused.

"Yes, sir—no, sir," mimicked Corporal Wilkes. "So you think you can get fresh with me, do you?"

"I—I wasn't—I didn't—"

"Don't answer me back! I asked you a question. Do you call yourself a soldier?"

Lem felt it coming, from way down inside. He struggled hard.

"How can I reply to your question, Corporal," he said sweetly, "if you tell me I mustn't answer you back?"

Corporal Wilkes turned the color of a ripe boil.

"Now," he exploded, "I'm going to report you for insubordination!"

Then Lem felt it come. He couldn't keep it down any longer.

"Why, you son—" he began.

A shudder tore through him, and his lips clamped tight.

Three more words, and in front of the whole squad Corporal Wilkes would have vanished forever. There would probably have been an old bulldog loose on the drill ground.

The effort was too much. The corporal had hardly opened his mouth to yell, "What!" when Private Higgins collapsed on his face in a dead faint.

He came to in the hospital. They said it had been the heat. But somebody must have done some influential talking, for Lem was transferred to another training camp.

This one was near a city, and it had a really good U.S.O. setup. Lem found himself going there whenever he could get away from camp. He had never got

around to learning to dance, but there were other attractions. There were books and magazines and records and games and a canteen. And there were girls.

GIRLS hadn't played much of a part in Lem's life up to this moment. Sometimes he dreamed he was walking somewhere with a girl and she smiled up at him and he put his arm around her waist and leaned down. And then, in one horrible nightmare, he said, "You're a sweet little duck"—and the girl was gone and he held a small thing with feathers, that quacked. Or he murmured, "My little lamb"—and she was covered with wool and bleated.

That sort of thing made him wary. Suppose some day he should fall for a girl named Kitty? He guessed he was meant to be lonely all his life. There was a curse on him, and it couldn't be lifted. But that was before he met Astrid Larson at the U.S.O.

Nobody would ever call Astrid "duck" or "lamb." She was as tall as he was, much more slender, constructed with appealing curves and arcs, and she was as divinely blonde as her Swedish ancestors could make her.

He couldn't dance, but she liked him anyway. She played checkers with him and she sat and talked to him. When he entered the U.S.O. she was watching for him and she had a special smile for him. Nights when she wasn't there, the place was a dungeon.

It just didn't seem possible that this wonderful girl could see anything in an overgrown, half-civilized farm boy like him, but she made it plain she did. Within a month they were seeing stars in each other's eyes.

The men weren't allowed to escort the girls home from the U.S.O., and they weren't supposed to make dates with them on the outside, either: but this is a free country, isn't it? Lemuel had a Sunday leave, and Astrid packed a picnic lunch, and they took an electric train and got off at a station she knew and walked two miles to a hill she told him about where there were oak and beech trees and a fellow could feel as if he were back home again.

He was going to ask her to marry him, and thought he knew what her answer would be. But there was something he had to go through with first. He couldn't spend his life with Astrid and keep from her the secret he had carried since he was twelve years old.

When the right time came, and they were sitting under a spreading beech tree, her head on his shoulder, his fingers tangled in her lovely blonde hair, in the sweet sleepiness of late afternoon, he told her the whole story.

When he finished, he was very pale.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Astrid?" he said huskily.

Astrid reached up and pulled his face down and kissed him.

"I think you're brave and wonderful and I love you," she said.

"Oh, my darling! Could you bear to marry a man who has to watch out all the time for fear—"

"Hush. We'll watch out together, and between us we'll make sure that it never happens to you again."

"Oh, Astrid!" he cried, his face radiant. "You dear, marvelous angel!"

And then there was a terrific flash of light and sound like a mighty wind, and up before his dazed eyes there ascended a gleaming, white-robed figure, its shining wings beating the air, its divinely stern and compassionate face turned toward his in eternal farewell.

Lemuel threw himself on the ground and clutched in agony at the clumps of grass beneath his fingers. "Oh, no no!" he groaned. "Oh, Astrid!"

He turned in horror and despair on himself, the miserable betrayer of his own happiness. "You did it yourself!" he cried. "You low, vile worm!"

. . . . Lemuel Higgins is still officially listed as a deserter. If the life-term of an earthworm has not yet expired, he is busy aerating the soil under the beech tree on the hill. ● ● ●

COURTESY CALL



"My lady, to all men you must be alluring, but—"

by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

SEVIN SENS-MOR LINE landed on Earth. Lowering himself to the radi-proof ground, he was immediately approached by a tall greasy young man who said angrily, "Say, didn't you hear the warning dit-ditta to hold off your landing until the Vestes freight cleared sky?"

"Yes, sir," said Sevin.

"Well, why the hell—?"

"I have," explained Sevin, "various landing devices which make collision or interference virtually impossible. The planet Pundar's contract with Earth—"

Was Pundar, World of Peace and Sanity, the Goal of Mankind?

"Bull." The other eyed the ship. "Pundar ship. Let me have your keys and I'll dock it. The Administration Building's over there."

"Thank you very kindly," said Sevin in his soft voice. The man ripped the keys out of his hand. "Thank you very much," repeated Sevin. He backed off smiling, then moved off across the field through a twilight grey.

They are so discourteous, he thought, all the beings of Earth and the hundred other warring, tormented planets. Well, Pundar is their dream. Pundar, the brightest, the cleanest, the sanest light in the sky. Someday they will fight free of the sludge of their barbarism; they will reach that for which they yearn, the perfection of Pundar.

Sevin entered the Administration Building, approached the clearance window.

"I can do for you?" the clerk said, not looking up.

"I would be pleased if you would. I am Sevin Sens-mor Line, of the Pundar State Department. I am here on a diplomatic call of some importance. A spacewire announcing my coming has been channeled to Raymond—"

"Let's have your visa." The eyeshaded man looked it over. "Pundar. Yes, I know Pundar. Beautiful place. So you're from Pundar. I don't see your State Department seal on here at all." He tossed it back.

"It's under the flap," Sevin hastened to say. "A custom to protect it from varying planetary climates."

"Oh. Well, let's see your identification oblongs. Anybody could have a visa, you know."

Sevin looked blank.

The clerk shook his head at the stupidity of some people. "You birds," he said, ringing a bell. "Since you don't have the oblongs, you'll have to wait over there on the bench." He turned back to his work.

SEVIN said, "Yes, sir." He sat down on the bench expectantly, holding his briefcase in his lap. The bench was uncomfortable, but Sevin was not uncomfortable. He simply adjusted himself, and let his thoughts turn dreamy. He was happy (but then he was always happy) that the unhappy, bickering worlds could look up to perfect Pundar and worship.

Sevin would never destroy that dream.

He could virtually hear Obture, of the Diplomatic Corps, intoning the axiom: "We of Pundar must never destroy that dream!"

And old Obture, continuing: "Sevin, why is it that we of Pundar are so happy, so pleased? What wonderful thing came into us from nowhere? Let us not ask. Let us be proud, and honored, knowing how the other planets would like to be as we are.

"Now, when you arrive on Earth, Sevin—?"

"I shall be courteous," said Sevin. "I shall be understanding. I shall be rational."

"*No matter what happens.*" Obture had solemnly accented each word.

Sevin assumed various positions on the bench. An hour passed. He arose, cleared his throat, whereupon the clerk looked up with lacklustre eyes. Then recognition crossed his face.

"I almost forgot you were here," he apologized. "I'll ring them again. But there's a war on, you know. The military are very busy."

He rang the bell again. Sevin sat down again. He felt vaguely uncomfortable inside.

Almost immediately a smartly outfitted lieutenant with beefy arms swung into the room.

"He doesn't have any identification oblongs," the clerk explained. The lieutenant frowned at Sevin, examined his visa and started patting him around the body.

"No weapons," the lieutenant mused. He took the briefcase, jerked it open. All it held were some blank forms to fill out and the letter Obture had given Sevin.

The lieutenant ripped one end of the letter open. Sevin gulped.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, dragging his protesting arm back to his side. "I am instructed to deliver this letter personally to Raymond, Chief of Staff of the United Interstellar Armies—"

"Um-huh." The lieutenant was looking at a second envelope which had fallen out of the first. "Oh, yes," he mused. "It says CONFIDENTIAL TO RAYMOND OF EARTH FROM OBTURE OF PUNDAR . . . However, anybody with a wordograph—"

Sevin said earnestly, "If you will look closely at the water-mark—"

"Ah, yes. Yes. The Pundar Seal. Well, let's go." He motioned Sevin ahead. "Let's go, boy."

Sevin's strained smile was as understanding as he could make it. He followed the lieutenant to the jet-car outside. It got out onto the run-way, took off, and landed on a roof somewhere in the middle of the big bright city. Sevin went down a ramp into an office populated by military people doing paper work. Sevin felt the eyes of everyone in the room covertly on him. He kept himself smiling and unconcerned while the lieutenant spoke to a girl at a desk.

The girl looked Sevin up and down and spoke into a communicator. Then she nodded for the lieutenant and Sevin to go on in.

In an inner office, Sevin stood before a desk which bore the name-plate COLONEL JUSTIN. The colonel became the third person to examine Sevin's visa.

"There seems to be," Sevin said, feeling his way, "every possible identification—"

"Yes, yes," the colonel interrupted coolly. "But we have fiendishly clever enemies. Fiendish, sir. You will allow me a little time to consider this." He waved to the lieutenant, who took Sevin to a small offside room and locked the door on him.

Sevin had his first severe jolt. He was captive.

THE place was comfortably enough fitted with the conveniences, however, so Sevin sat into a deep chair, and proceeded to adjust himself. He closed his eyes and relived several tender scenes with Linsa.

The happiness of himself and Linsa was overwhelming. There was no strife between them, because there was no strife on Pundar.

"We shall be so happy," Linsa had said tranquilly. "If only the other planets could be like us. Someday they will be. Sevin, when you go to Earth they will see reflected in you the goodness and sanity of Pundar."

Now here he was, on Earth — the mother planet, so it was said. Yes, while Earth and a hundred other planets fought a blindly emotional war it must be good for them to know that a citadel of uncluttered reason existed.

Sevin fell contentedly asleep, and was awakened by the lieutenant.

"Well, it's okay," he was told. "The colonel has okayed you. He's made an appointment for you with Raymond for the 14th of next month."

Sevin started to say, "Next month!"

Instead he smiled politely and agreed to the date. But inwardly he was shaken. He was to have seen Raymond the day of his arrival.

"Your plans won't be interrupted, I hope," the lieutenant said solicitously.

"Oh, hardly at all. I had planned to take my fiancee to the Festival of Balloons on the 12th, but I shall simply send a spacewire canceling the date. Then I shall take advantage of the extra time to tour Earth and visit historical shrines."

"That's great." The lieutenant's expression was odd. "Won't your girl be sore?"

"Linsa angry?" Sevin smiled. "I think not."

"Disappointed, then," the lieutenant prodded.

"Oh, no. She will adjust herself."

The lieutenant's lips clamped. He put Sevin into the jet-car and dropped him

into the heart of a thoroughly strange city.

"Thank you very much for your kindnesses," Sevin called after him.

"Don't mention it," the lieutenant said, and took off in much of a hurry.

Sevin caught a jet-taxi, which deposited him at the nearest hotel. He sent a spacewire canceling his date with Linsa. He spent several hours looking over travel literature. He bought tickets, and made extensive plans for a tour of the world. Then he went to his room, had a meal sent up, bathed, and went happily to sleep.

In the middle of the night the 'phone rang. Sevin easily oriented himself to the disturbance."

The lieutenant spoke brusquely. "Got some good news for you," he said. "An appointment has been arranged with Raymond for tomorrow after all."

Sevin felt as if a sharp hook had caught him through the solar plexus.

"Thank you," he said politely. "That will be perfectly satisfactory."

"I hope this little change in plans hasn't inconvenienced you," said the lieutenant, warily. "You can keep that date with your girl. I hope you didn't cancel it."

"Well—" said Sevin. "As a matter of fact I did. I had thought of taking a tour of the world. Do you suppose I could get my money back if the situation were explained?"

"Bought tickets, huh? Hmm. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you very very much," said Sevin, warmly.

The lieutenant hesitated before hanging up. "You're not sore about anything, are you?" There was an odd probing curiosity in his voice.

Sevin felt tired and a little confused; he knew he would not be able to get back to sleep.

"Not at all," he assured the lieutenant. "I am extremely happy that the change in plans was made."

The lieutenant muttered something garbled and hung up.

SEVIN, clasping his briefcase and very carefully dressed in the Earth manner, announced himself to the uniformed girl behind the desk. She nodded. Yes, the appointment was registered. Sevin should seat himself over there. It would only be a few minutes.

He waited two hours, and began to wonder at the strange thing happening inside him. Every time a door opened he jumped. Every time the communicator buzzed he leaned anxiously forward, expecting to hear his name called.

He made a supreme effort to adjust himself, and felt better.

After another thirty minutes, he was exhausted from supreme efforts. He approached the girl at the desk. At that particular moment the communicator buzzed and spoke his name.

"You may go in now," the girl smiled.

Sevin summoned a smile of his own. "Thank you," he said, "thank you very much."

Now he found himself in still another office. A uniformed aide casually questioned him, examined the visa, examined the briefcase. "Yes," he said absently. "Yes. Please sit down. It will be only a few moments."

He disappeared through a door. Sevin sat down. Something unpleasant was happening inside him. He thought. It cannot be; they cannot live this way, day after day, year after year, every day and year of their lives. Human nerves are not built to endure—

The door through which the aide disappeared opened. Sevin leaned forward, ready to rise. A woman of perhaps thirty Earth-years came out. She was dressed in a close-fitting deep blue two-piece outfit which fashion experts were at that time calling the scabbard style. By wearing it, she did a thoroughly expert job of revealing her thoroughly stunning figure. Her face was a sleepy, golden allure. Walking toward the exit, there was the barest interruption of her step as she looked studiedly straight into Sevin's eyes.

Sevin's heart pounded against his ribs.

"She's very nearly as beautiful as Linsa, he thought.

The moment of her inspection was actually only a second. But it was intense and surprising. Her disturbing bold eyes acquired more of sleepy allure. Then she was gone. Sevin squirmed on the bench. Discouragingly, at this crucial moment before he was to see Raymond, his senses were on fire.

He tried to adjust himself, and was dismayed when he was unsuccessful. At that moment, however, the aide cheerfully beckoned him from the open door. Savin found himself in a small anteroom.

"Wait here a moment," the aide said cheerfully. "Everything's been arranged. Raymond is beyond that door. Unfortunately, he had his noon meal late, else you would not have waited."

There were no chairs. Sevin shifted from one foot to the other. To pass the time, he closed his eyes and relived scenes with Linsa. Disturbingly, the face of the woman in the outer office obtruded itself. He forced his eyes open. He wished he were back on Pundar. It was the first time in his life he'd ever wanted to be where he was not.

He did not wait long this time, however. The aide smiled from the door:

"Raymond will see you now."

Instantly Sevin felt happy and enthusiastic about life. He felt such relief that the memory of all the unpleasant false stops and starts virtually disappeared. Straightening his coat, he reviewed once more the protocol of the situation, and started gravely toward the door the aide was holding open.

Just then, the exit door behind him opened. Two uniformed men entered hurriedly. One firmly took hold of Sevin's arm, while the other produced a paper and announced, mechanically, "The High Commission requests that you, traveling under the name Sevin Sens-mor Line, are to be detained upon appearance of new evidence." The man looked up. "You *do* claim yourself to be Sevin Sens-mor Line?"

The room seemed gently tilting—righting itself—tilting again. With supreme effort, Sevin regained control.

"I do claim my identity to be that represented," he said softly.

"Then you're under arrest."

Each man held an arm. Sevin discovered his legs to be rooted firm. Scant feet away was Raymond. He could not make himself move away from that goal. One of the men stepped back, struck Sevin's face with the back of his hand. The blow was pure surprise. Sevin stood feeling it for several seconds, studying it, taking apart the entire action piece by piece.

The faces of his captors danced. He heard his own voice.

"I shall go with you, of course," he murmured. "I had hoped Raymond would see me as planned. On the other hand, I would not presume to go against the wishes of your High Commission."

"That's better," said the man who had struck him. They jostled him out of the room.

HALFWAY across town, Sevin was shoved into a brightly lighted room on the ground floor of a building most of whose windows were barred. Again there was the ubiquitous scattering of the military. He was pushed to the center of the room.

"Welcome, Baynok," said the ironic voice of the fat-faced greying little man who seemed to be in control. "Your plan to assassinate Raymond almost succeeded. We of the High Commission, however, are not to be caught napping. We shall give you a chance to confess."

Sevin swayed wearily in the middle of the floor. His hair was disarrayed, he had been struck twice more en route, his coat was wrinkled, his shiny shoes scuffed.

"I shall be happy to confess to whatever I am guilty of," he said.

The fat-faced man hit him hard on the carotid artery. Sevin almost dropped. The man said savagely, "None of your smooth talk. Confess! Confess

that you are Baynok of Luntar. Confess that you have, in succession, successfully assassinated General Haycox of the First Army, Governor-General Strathon of the Keron Moons, Third Sector Chief Ogilvie, and that you planned to assassinate Raymond. Confess that you murdered and took over the identity of one Sevin Sens-mor Line of the planet Pundar."

Sevin swayed, his eyes showing only a blur of pain.

No matter, said a faraway droning voice, *what happens*. . . .

"Sir," he said, "to the best of my knowledge, I am indeed Sevin Sens-mor Line."

The man stepped closer, smiling. "You call me a liar?"

"Not at all, sir. I perfectly understand you are doing your duty in the only way at your command."

His inquisitor barked a laugh at the others in the room. "Smooth. That's Baynok, all right." He made a motion, upon which a man carrying a bull-whip came forward. "Whip him until he confesses."

Sevin schooled his expression as he let the idea of the whip come across to him. He found it difficult to believe. He was of the planet Pundar, where there was no evil, only a happy perfection. All situations were to be adjusted to and enjoyed. How could he adjust to this bruteman about to whip him for an impossible crime?

He did try to adjust himself, but failed—for the first sweeping crack of the whip across the small of his back was like lightning slicing along his nerves. The whip unwound. Sevin unwound with it, falling. He was on hands and knees, getting up, when the whip came again. The world turned white.

"You are Baynok," said a persistent voice.

Sevin heard himself speak. "Sir," he said, "if it would please you I would be Baynok. But it would not please you to have me lie."

The whip came again. There is only one adjustment, Sevin thought. He let himself faint. . . .

"Now that's better, that's much better, Baynok. You knew we'd get the confession out of you eventually."

He was sitting in a chair, shuddering. His eyes were opening. His inquisitor was sitting on the desk, swinging a leg and being happy. Everybody else was out of the room.

"Care to reread it, Baynok?" A paper was held under his eyes. Through shimmering waves of agony the print was a blur, but he made some of it out. Yes, he was Baynok. He had killed such and such and such and such. He had impersonated one Sevin Sens-mor Line. He had meant to assassinate Raymond. His signature was at the bottom of the document.

Sevin's head swayed. "I am about to faint," he said. "Did I truly sign the paper, sir?"

"It's your signature, isn't it?"

"It seems so, sir. I can't see very well."

No matter what happens.

"Baynok," he heard a voice drone, it seemed much later, "you are to be given a spy's death at the hands of a firing squad. Your bravery, however, has much merit: your body somehow shall be returned to Luntar."

"Yes, sir," said Sevin, and heard himself add with crazy gentility, "Thank you, sir, thank you very much."

NIGHT, and the low voices of other political prisoners. His back was bandaged. The smell of the antiseptic and healing paste was overpowering. Sevin lay trembling on his stomach, longing for Pundar and Linsa. He was caught in some tremendous intrigue. He was on the brink of death. But he knew he had not failed his task.

Pundar was the hope of all scattered mankind.

In the corridor there were footsteps, low voices. "Yes, ma'am." It was the voice of the corporal on duty. "He's in here. Yes, ma'am. I do trust you."

The cell door opened, admitting a woman who held a small flashlight. Its beam shined upward on her face; It was the face of the woman who had made such an unsettling impact on Sevin not many hours before. He was reminded of Linsa, as the fragrance the woman wore preceded her.

The soldier outside left the door ajar and went away.

"I didn't know you were Baynok when I saw you today." The woman's voice was a husky slur of sound. "I might have known no one but a Baynok could have affected me that way."

Her sandalled feet whispered against the cement floor. She was closer. Her voice came again, deliberate and casually meaningful.

"Life with Raymond is nothing, Baynok. I have security—power—but not love. Do you understand?"

The hand holding the flash dropped to her side. He felt the heat of her body as it stood limply close to his. Her shadowy, scented face turned up to his, her lips waiting.

Her body touched his.

"With you I would take danger instead of security, Baynok. Put your arms around me."

He saw what she took no trouble to hide—that her every motion and word had deliberate design; that she was studying him, and with submerged amusement knew that she had power over him. Her flash went out.

It was the same perfume Linsa used, Sevin thought. Almost he could imagine that Linsa stood here.

He was tired. Emotionally, he was trebled, yearning for an outlet to soothe the tension in brain and stomach. Put your arms around Linsa; pretend it *is* Linsa—

No.

Her laugh came, studied and careless. "You are being discourteous, Baynok. I am the wife of Raymond. Do not be impolite. Kiss me."

Her arms slid around his shoulders. She rubbed her wet lips first against his cheek, and then his lips. His lips were parched by the touch of hers.

"We are alone," she whispered.

I cannot be discourteous, Sevin thought painfully, no matter what happens. Yes, I will kiss her and pretend it is Linsa. It will soothe my nerves, surely. There will be nothing to regret.

She was pressing against him now, demanding, while the perfume of Linsa became an eddying hypnosis in his nostrils. "I love you, Baynok," she said, permitting her voice to shake. "Oh, I love you. I will save your life—but first kiss me!"

His brain was tottering. The vision of Linsa was very strong. All he need do was raise his arms, crush her to him and kiss her. He swayed, his arms came half up—he broke out in sudden cold sweat—

No!

"My lady," he said, "to all men you must be alluring. But if I were disrespectful to Raymond, I would be disrespectful to you as well."

Her arms turned cold, and limply fell away.

"Disrespectful to Raymond," she said wonderingly. "Tomorrow morning, because of Raymond, you die before a firing squad."

He said nothing. Her lips, that had been tempting, curved in a sneer.

"Your Linsa," she said, "did well to get rid of you."

Her feet whispered up the corridor. The corporal shut the cell door. Sevin stood petrified. She knew he was not Baynok. . . She knew of Linsa. . . But Linsa had *not* tried to get rid of him!

What had she meant?

In the morning, when they came for Sevin, white streaks of light shot at intervals of every six seconds across his vision. During the night he had developed muscular tics in several parts of his body. Through his mind raced dreadful fears and sorrows and horrors that were unbelievable. This was Earth, so much worse than he'd imagined. This was *not* Pundar. Oh, no. Never could

there be anything one hundredth as foolish as this on Pundar. These people, these surly, sadistic people—they chose to die a thousand small deaths every day. They must suffer and inflict suffering to be happy—

Well, Sevin would not resist. Naturally. The perfect, peaceful, civilized dream of Pundar must remain intact.

He shut his eyes as the guns roared.

"YOU may sit up, Sevin Sens-mor Line of the planet Pundar," said Raymond. The Chief of the United Interstellar Armies was standing negligently near Sevin, the rutted lines of his dark face deepened in a faint smile. Sevin sat up, clutching at his bandaged arm.

"The fools were told to aim high," said Raymond, carelessly studying Sevin. "One did not do so. No matter. We have healing pastes perhaps as good as those on Pundar—where there are no accidents."

Sevin hardly heard him. He was utterly weary. An ironic thought came: He had at last won through to the great Raymond. Now all he wanted to do was give the letter to Raymond and get back to Pundar. Half-heartedly he looked around the room for his briefcase; but all he saw—all he could see, suddenly—was a picture of Linsa.

A photograph of Linsa, on the table to Raymond's left.

He stared at it until his head was roaring.

Raymond was saying, indulgently, "Yes, Sevin, you passed the test as I expected. We subjected you to every discourtesy we could think of, even the ultimate discourtesy of killing you.

"A normal human being would have broken somewhere. Somewhere your nerves should have frayed. Being involved in that absurd, obviously papped-up intrigue should have been sufficient cause for some irrational, purely emotional reaction. Having an attractive woman thrown at you, offering you everything, even escape, should have been enough excuse for some human feeling. But no. The paragon from the planet Pundar was not ruffled.

"Are you listening, Sevin?"

Linsa. Linsa. It was a study of Linsa.

Raymond's voice tightened, his eyes turned sardonic.

"Yes, indeed, Sevin. You passed the test. A race of supermen has developed, very nearly unrealized by us, on the planet Pundar."

Sevin was standing. Out of some mad, whirling tempest the words of Raymond came in.

He said, softly, pointing, "The girl?"

Raymond casually glanced at the photograph. He shrugged. "Oh . . . a wench from one of the outer planets who takes a fancy to me. An engaging sort of a slut, however—"

"I see," said Sevin, politely.

It was Linsa.

Supermen. I passed their test. They actually think we're supermen. I didn't fail you, Obture. The hundred warring planets have their dream. They can look forward to being like us someday. Supermen.

Then, somehow, everything went wrong. A thoroughly *rational* thought took over his body: I shall hit Raymond—hard. I shall try to hurt him, to knock him unconscious. The roaring was still in his ears as he took two necessary steps toward Raymond and brought his doubled fist up from his hip.

His fist crashed into Raymond's face. Raymond fell backward, caught his balance, and stopped himself from falling further by taking hold of a table edge. He hung there, studying Sevin.

Sevin heard himsef saying, through the roar in his head, "Even for purposes of a test, my Linsa will not be called a slut."

He looked at his fist, the one that had hit Raymond. It was shaking badly. His whole body was shaking. Behind his eyes were the unshed tears of anger. But farther down was craven fear of what he had done.

I hit Raymond, he thought, and made myself think I was acting rationally. I've failed. After all I endured, to be goaded into acting on irrational impulse. The dream is destroyed. Raymond will see to that.

Raymond's dark rutted face creased deeper still with the low laughter that came rumbling out of his chest. It was a harsh, derisive kind of laughter, but there was relief overlaying that harshness.

His lips were ugly with that strange combination of relief and scorn when he spoke. He said harshly, "How would you feel if you thought you were being domesticated and might be roped into a backyard like a wild animal that hasn't the brains to fight a superior life form?

"For a dozen years we've suspected you of Pundar—you and your intellectual snobbery, your smug aristocracy of reason. And we've been afraid that somehow a genus of man superior to ours—*and therefore dangerous to ours* —was being bred in great numbers behind our backs.

"For reasons of my own, I didn't think so. Others in my ranks weren't so sure. You were to be the test.

"You ought to be damned glad you let yourself have a human reaction. If you hadn't—Sevin, before morning Pundar and its "supermen" would have been blown out of the sky!

"Now let us see what all-important message the Pundar State Department sends."

From an inner pocket he withdrew the envelope Sevin had brought from Pundar. Raymond tore it open and read . . . and laughed. The laugh tore into Sevin. Pundar, goal of man, something inside him whispered—with chilling lack of conviction. . . .

"You may tell Obture of Pundar," said Raymond, "that my staff and I will find it impossible to attend your Peace Day Celebrations. The pressures of war take us in quite a different direction."

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

worth's, but I would still class his story as fantasy, because he has left the most incredible question of all unanswered: to wit, what does Angela see in Roland?

Here a word of praise must be inserted for the illustrator who, no matter how the author describes his characters, continues to make demigods and demigoddesses of male and female alike. This is in the finest spirit of non-discrimination, and to him I pay tribute. Mind you, I have no objection whatsoever to beauty, but I want it distributed fairly—if the heroines are to be ideal, so should the heroes be. And, if the heroes are ordinary men, how about giving us ordinary females a break? We may have two heads, but our hearts are in the right place. — *81-06 34th Avenue, Jackson Heights 72, New York.*

Your willingness to suspend operations on the atomic chain reaction and eavesdrop while Roland makes a pass at Angela depends of course upon the state of your own arteries and your interest in sex. If you're undersexed it'll bore the devil out of you; if your glands are up to par you'll be quite willing to take time out and see how Roland makes out. Then of course there's the scientific aspect—biology is just as scientific as nuclear fission, so is no more out of place. We agree that it shouldn't be dragged in willy nilly, but if it's that kind of a story let's not duck it.

Why is Angela always a shapely, golden-haired lass of twenty while Roland is forty and flatulent? Ah, there you touch upon one of the most painful ironies of our bi-sexual civilization. Angela is, even at twenty, a woman, therefore above all things practical. If Roland were her own age he might be better to look at but he would have amassed nothing in the way of a bank account. At forty Roland may have lost some teeth and hair but he has a going business and three bank books, and it's much more practical for little Angela to hold hands with him than with his adolescent version. And she does—she does! So don't blame friend author for wish-fulfilment; if anything he is cleaving close to bitter reality. For it is indeed the forty-and-over-club, thin of hair and sparse of muscle, who grab off the tastiest dishes while their younger editions lurk around the outskirts with their tongues hanging out. What does Angela see in Roland? Well, it looks something like this: $.

Glad you've no objection to beauty, anyway.

We thought it dressed up the magazine to have some good looking females scattered about. We'll put in a requisition for you for some younger Rolands.

THE WHIMMERING SHIVERS

by Donald C. MacKechnie

Dear Sam: Seems like every time I read the letter columns of the Thrilling Twins I run across some character or characters, whose views run contrary to my own. The April SS is no exception. I'm soured on Marion Zimmer Bradley this time.

Her little epistle re The Last Frontier gives me the whimpering shivers. To begin with, the record, as she calls it, says nothing of the sort. The lure of a new frontier, of new horizons, has never kept man from settling down to solve rather than defer the problems of his existence. The record indicates almost exactly the opposite.

From the first smatterings of recorded history down through the present, the pioneer has always been the solid citizen, wandering only until he can set down roots. The men who blaze the trails are the ones who generally fail to settle down—but theirs is a peculiar, and often understandable, philosophy. They were, and are, the type of men who invariably see the far side of the hill as greener. Their very makeup forced them to move on, to investigate, to see for themselves, while the men who trod on their heels stopped, rested, and put down the foundation of the country we know today.

Before you have a building, you must have an architect. Then, the carpenter and the bricklayer and the plumber, *et all.* Following these comes the inhabitant, who lives in or occupies the building, who develops its character and channels its usefulness to the rest of mankind. But the architect, the *visualizer*, moves on to new and, in his mind, better buildings. He sees beyond the here and the now. He foresees, if you will, the progress that must inevitably follow his wanderings. He lets the other fellow take care of the problem-solving. And these trail-blazers were not the failures! Misfits, perhaps—but their very natures made them for seeking, not for solving!

So, Space Travel is analogous to their trail-blazing. Man must move continually forward. He may lag momentarily, but must never actually stop, for cessation of progress is bound to breed stagnation. A race that desires new horizons is *not* in its infancy! It is merely a race that regards stationary existence as a prelude to extinction.

La Bradley also says that California *was* the last frontier. Nuts! This is nothing more than the peculiarly American ostrich-mindedness so evident to people schooled in other countries. Nationalism is fine, but a people so influential as the Americans should know of other countries besides their own. (Don't get me wrong—I've nothing against Americans. They're swell individuals. But collectively, they impress me as being too close to home in mentality as well as loyalty. Besides, I married one). But the fact remains: California was *not* the last frontier. There are areas of Australia that barely recognise the tread of man's footsteps.

And, in the Canadian Northwest, there are tracts of land that make Texas look like a postage stamp, which are so close to being completely unexplored that it's almost painful. And these areas are being opened up today by men as forward looking as those who opened up the American West, the Canadian West, and a host of once-unknown territories.

Furthermore, the buffalo is *not* extinct! Recently, in Alberta, hundreds of buffalo were slaughtered because they were becoming too numerous. And the Redman is not vanished! He is merely subjugated, looked down on, taken advantage of, and ignored! And not by the trailblazers, but by the problem-solvers who came after them!

So, why not Space Travel? It's a logical next step. Why wait a few years until man has finished his house-cleaning job on earth? Suppose, somewhere in the vastnesses of space, we find a culture that can complement our own and give us valuable pointers in how to accomplish that house-cleaning? Is it completely impossible?

The Teddy-Bear gimmick leaves me cold.

Enough of M.Z.B. On to Ye Ed's Editorial!

Feminine beauty is fine. I really appreciate it—and the more I see of it, the better I like it. I agree with you wholeheartedly! If sex fits, let's have sex—not in so many words, but in natural, believable sequences which have bearing on a story-line. On covers, sure; but mixed in with liberal portions of the type of illustration that graced the October '51 TWS.

I have now read all of SS for 1951! That's an accomplishment, because I'm really behind in my reading. For your information, and for what it's worth, I rate the lead novels from SS in '51 in the following order: THE STAR WATCHERS and HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS—tied for first place. THE STARMEN OF LLYRDIS, an easy second. THE DARK TOWER, not a bad third. PASSPORT TO JUPITER, an uneasy fourth. THE SEED FROM SPACE, a very lagging last. Of the short stories, only Vance's MEN OF THE TEN BOOKS stood out. The rest range from passable to absolutely lousy . . . (I spoke of this one in my last letter to SS.).

In reply to your question at the end of my last published letter, I thought DOUBLE JEOPARDY no more than average. The plot was O.K., but the patness of the character Angela, and the fact that much of the action could be foreseen, dropped it on my rating-scale. I'd like to see more of the same type, though, as I don't feel I can offer a true criticism until I have other STF-Detective stories with which to compare it.

Please extend my thanks to those fans who replied to my request, but to whom I have been unable to reply as yet. I solemnly promise to buckle down in the near future.

That's all, and thanks for listening . . . and for going monthly! Except for one thing—if I got behind in my reading when you were bi-monthly, how can I ever hope to catch up now?—*521 19th Ave., N.W., Calgary, Alberta.*

Having had our say on this topic, we'll sit the rest of the argument out, merely ducking at strategic moments.

You're going to have to read nights—all nights.

IT'S BASIC
by Peggy Kaye

Dear Sam: I have long been a silent bystander to all those pros and cons on everything from religion to trimmed edges, but now I feel I must give voice too. O.K.?

Much has been said in TEV about the modesty or immodesty of the artwork and till now I've been content to let the others slug it out, but since you felt the need of doing an editorial on the subject, I've decided to put in my two cents or whatever it may be worth.

As far as I'm concerned, the whole sex controversy is ridiculous and we shouldn't get our poor Sam all het up over it. Sex is here to stay, thank goodness, and I don't mean the kind you snicker about behind your hand. What gives with these characters who don't want to have any female interest or illos in the stories they read? Are they trying to convince themselves that men are the only beings really important in this existence? Or do they take that reference to MAN as the only intelligent species on earth literally—meaning MAN and not WOMAN too?

If that is the case, no wonder it shakes them down to their poor misguided little souls when they read a story in which the hero finds himself romantically inclined towards a desirable (horrors!) heroine. Maybe they'd like it better if the guy were a eunuch, h'mm? What gets me is how anyone presumably intelligent and broadminded enough to enjoy science fiction can be so narrow minded on anything as basic as the fact that so long as men and women share life on our globe there will be sex appeal, one for the other. They must think flowers terribly promiscuous, scattering their pollen just any old place. Tsk, tsk.

Now about the illustrations: I don't know about your other readers but I take a great deal of interest in the art work. A particularly good illustration, such as a Finlay, can often move me as much as a good story. Nor have I ever seen a piece of art work in any of your mags that could be considered the least offensive. The girls on the covers have always worn more than the currently popular Bikini bathing suits openly displayed at any public beach. As for those unclad girls that Finlay often uses to adorn his bubbles, well if it weren't for the shoulder-length tresses and the barest (no pun intended) suggestion of roundness you would be hard put to find anything else to indicate the female form, especially in a lewd way. I'd give my eyeteeth to be able to draw like that.

I wonder, do these same "holier-than-thous" find the real nudes done by the Masters filthy? Bet they consider that "art" and exclaim over the beauty of the work. Or perhaps they turn horror-stricken eyes away from these too. Durned if I can figure out how anyone can find filth in SS and her sister mags. If I sound incoherent about the whole thing it's because even my pen is sputtering with indignation. Perhaps one reason I get so riled up about objections to females is because I'm one. No one has ever objected to my existence before and I take it as a personal slur when someone decides I'm not necessary to the scheme of things. I rather had the impression we (women) were. Must be my licentious upbringing. You see, my father and mother live together. — *74 Capen St., Dorchester 24, Mass.*

P.S. Loved your answer to "Snarly Seibel"! I'm gonna like you just fine, Sam.

Editorially speaking, we just hope the rest of the gang got as much of a kick out of your letter as we did. This is honest indignation sounding off, fellow humans and BEMS, and there is a clear simplicity about it we love. Thanks for the boost, Peggy.

QUICK WATSON, THE NOODLE
by (Mrs.) Helen M. Huber

Dear Mr. Mines: Regarding your comment on a letter from Norman G. Browne in April Startling, do not reach for the aspirin bottle as I am not going to march up and down the pages of your publication (if at all) with a large cross, flaming or not, and resurrect the battle of religion. You asked what an agnostic pantheist was, and since I did not know either, and heing the least lazy of the two of us (not to mention that you probably have a secretary at your disposal) I betook myself to the New Century Dictionary and looked it up.

"Century" says AGNOSTIC—One who holds that the ultimate cause (God) and the essential nature of things are unknown or unknowable, or that human knowledge is limited to experience. PANTHEISM—The religious belief or philosophical doctrine which identifies the universe with God; also, the heathen worship of all the gods.

This seems to me a paradox. Are you trying to *trap* the fen into another religious discussion expecting that they will not look up Agnostic Pantheist?

And a note to Mr. Browne, that fan you spoke of who considers the Bible the greatest S-F story ever written, has he read it? If he is really a fan of science fiction he wouldn't want to miss the greatest, would he? Only he should read it with an open mind, not an open head.

Which brings me to another point I'd like to make and this refers to fandom in general. Has it ever occurred to you that science fiction fandom and authordom, could be the greatest single force for tolerance and brotherhood on the face of this globe? It's been said that people who would conquer the universe must first conquer themselves. Therefore if people here are conditioning themselves via sf to live with red men, green men, purple men, orange men, plant men, metal men, fish men, etc., doesn't it stand to reason they should begin by living peacefully and tolerantly among red men, white men, brown men, black men, and yellow men, here on their own planet?

Another editor of a different sf magazine pointed out recently that aliens to our world would have to be taught cultural patterns as well as language, and religion is a part of culture. We would also have to learn the same of visitors to avoid making a faux pas in our relations with them. How will we learn to accept an alien culture and religion if we cannot accept the various religions on our own world? Friendly discussions are in order but heated arguments are out of place.

About sex, anything I could say would only be what you have said only in different words. As long as you know where to draw the line, sex is

fine. After all, though I didn't care for it myself, it wasn't the historical background that made a best seller out of Forever Amber. As far as I'm concerned STARTLING has never gone beyond the line, nor TWS either, and Venus de Milo, undraped as she may be, has never been called indecent, nor has the discus thrower.

VULCAN'S DOLLS was a haunting story and I loved the cover. THE LAST DAYS OF SHANDAKOR was equally enthralling, and, L. Sprague De Camp, I can see the shades of LEST DARKNESS FALL falling all over THE GLORY THAT WAS. However that doesn't mean I didn't like it. I loved it boy, just loved it.

Say this April cover ought to satisfy the sex-less ones. I'm crazy about that blue. Me, I like anything you do, almost.

And on that cheerful note I bid you adieu, since that is all the French I know beside faux pas. —*20 Stanley Street, Irvington, New Jersey.*

There is a famous line about coming into a controversy with clean hands. Not wishing to seem immodest, about the only thing I claim absolute innocence for is the desire to trap the fen into another religious wrangle. It makes me squirm—as you might have deduced from my earlier comment that when you monkey with a man's beliefs you don't change him, you only irritate him. And that's about all these brawls achieve, a general irritation. I'd rather see the discussions channeled into lines which might achieve something more constructive in the way of logical thinking. For example I'd nominate your remarks on brotherhood and learning to live with your neighbors. On the whole, despite the obvious bulge of tongue in cheek, a letter of charm. Come again.

RED FACE DEPARTMENT

Courtesy of Marion Cox

Dear Sam: Your editorial was the first thing I read in the April isue of SS. That is, I read it as far as the middle of the second column. There I ran across this sentence: "And somewhere in this issue there's a letter from a smart gal demanding that her sex be given a break by having more and better looking men on the covers." I turned immediately to the letters and began looking for that letter. I couldn't find it. If it really was there, would you mind telling me just where? I'd like to agree with the gal, whoever she is.

Yes indeed, we need more men on the covers. Take a look at the April cover. I imagine those are men in the picture, but why should they be so tiny and so far away? You never make your gals so insignificant. Remember, you do have some feminine readers, and I imagine most of them prefer seeing handsome men, rather than pretty girls.

I'm going to start campaigning for men on the covers. Come on, gals. Give me a helping hand. I have a feeling I'm going to need it.

Putting the publication date of the next issue in the current issue will be a big improvement. It's no fun wondering when the next ish will be out. Even if you aren't always out at the specified time we won't mind, as long as you're only off schedule by a day or two. Please start this practice soon.

The short stories, though not outstanding, were good. Judging from past experience, Brackett and deCamp will be even better.

Right now, before I forget it, I'd like to mention two of my favorite fan clubs. If you don't belong to either, join both. If you belong to only one, join the other. One is ISFCC, or THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION CORRESPONDENCE CLUB. The other one is TLMA. (That's pronounced to rhyme with dilemma.) The initials stand for THE LITTLE MONSTERS OF AMERICA. By the time this letter is printed, I'll be living in Iowa, so write for information to Marian Cox, 79th A. B. Sq., Sioux City, Iowa. (Dad is in the Air Force.)

I was particularly interested in the article, HOW'S YOUR VOLTAGE? No need to tell me that electricity is the basis of life. I found it out by experience! I'm extremely sensitive to electrical shocks, and a silk dress, wool coat, and cold weather are enough to knock me silly, if I'm not careful. I sometimes have the feeling that if I carried a light bulb with me, I could solve the problem of finding things in dark closets. Any of you other fans have this problem?

Sex is fine in stories where it plays a logical part, but when a story is written around a main theme of sex it isn't so good. We can't very well ignore the fact that there are two sexes, but it's such a well-known fact, that we needn't mention it in every story just for the sake of reminding ourselves that it's so.

Well, see you next issue. —*79th A.B. Sq., Sioux City, Iowa.*

The blooper is ours; the letter you were looking for appeared in April, but in TWS, not SS. It was by Evelyn Catoe and her address is 323 Powers Street. New Brunswick, N. J. if you should want to get together for a little feminine cooperation. My apologies for confusing you. Incidentally, I like the turn this gives the whole argument on sex. Nothing should confuse the whole deal more than this sudden intrusion of a feminist angle with a platform of more male sex appeal. We'll back you to the last leopard skin, gals.

BONSOIRS IN BUNCHES

by Willie Miller

Dear Sham: Bravo! Bravo I say! You jolly well chopped the ole pilings from under "Snarling Scibel's" complaining platform (April ish) and you say you cut out parts of his letter!? Ooh, whutchew must have klipped! After Alice Bullock's adroit and affable admirings of JOURNEY TO BARKUT I'm afraid old Snarly's snarl seemed seven shades stronger. Tch!

I'm still basking in THE GLORY THAT WAS, but oh, my poor tongue! Feels like some Boy Scout practiced tying his knots in it. Those names in the story! Oy! It took me years to get

"rubber baby buggy bumpers" down pat and along comes L. Sprague and snows me under with "Xanthippou caught Kritias Kallaischrou carelessly chewing cucumbers." We shed . . . see what I mean! Anyhoo, I enjoyed the story and am only jesting to take up space.

Space? Space is something empty. Empty is what my head probably is so why should you listen to nothing?

Bidding you bunches of belated bonsoirs! — *VR-1 N.A.S., Patuxent River, Maryland.*

Beneficent benedictions benefit benevolent beings—which freely translated means thanks for kind words. How come you say you got nothing in your head? You got JOURNEY TO BARKUT and GLORY. And we both got Snarly Seibel—ouch!

COYOTE HOWELL RIDES AGAIN

by Sabretooth Seibel

Dear Uncle Goodheart: (Hold that tiger! I'm not going to put it in that packing crate after all and send it to Sam.) Yerp! Yerp! You wouldv'e gotten a surprise when you opened that, Sam! After reading your reply Sam, I didn't go off into a tango of mental gymnastics but instead am to put it mildly, amazed. That anyone is that unbelievably ingenuous just doesn't seem possible to me. Since that is the case please excuse my unfortunate rage I directed at you when it appeared you were poking fun at me. And as for you being a "Machiavellian strategist," if you're that unsubtle you couldn't even be a politician let alone a Machiavelli, so there is absolutely nothing I will regret in any of my crafty letters to you.

I don't have any "built in grouch" as the above will enable you to deduce easily enough; in fact, I look upon the world with a lusting—I mean, *lusty,* eye. Indeed, if I ever visited your office (stop turning white—I said *if,* didn't I?) I would probably say to your receptionist: "I find your light deflections are not offensive to my optical sensory centers." To which she would reply "Huh?" and we would be off to a round of conversation, etc. I would forget all about the brickbat propped carelessly over one shoulder, and held in a determined hand.

In reading your of-late stories I have made some startling comparisons (who threw that?) between them and certain other stories published many years ago. Undoubtedly you've come across such little gems as Sienkewisz' (akkk! gasp!) QUO VADIS, the autobiography of that scapegrace with the swagger, Benvenuto Cellini, a certain book called BULLFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY, and the one about King Arthur and his knights of the round table, plus too many more to mention in the short space you cut me off at. It appears to me—mind, only a slight suspicion— that these fantasies slightly resemble them—that is, the fantasies you're running now. Perhaps since I've associated with the more by far superior of the genre is why I dislike the abortions you print so intensely. It seems somewhat to me like a commercialized ARABIAN NIGHTS, with the Djinni going around selling hot dogs to the spectators, while Sheherazade (be damned if I'll look up the correct spelling) proficiently purveys her fleshly wares. And the hero in QUO VADIS yanks out a spiltgt and mows down all the nasties.

Which brings me to the point of this discourse. I can say with reasonable positiveness that you've perused Healy's NEW TALES OF SPACE AND TIME, so what I have to say won't be lost on you. Now those are the kind of stories I like, that I really like. I spent a whole hour reading that book, savoring every word of it, especially Kris Neville's haunting, memorable, wonderful BETTYANN. You should trap Neville some dark night and chain him up till he wrote a story like that for you. He's almost as much of a genius as I am. (I admit it; I'm a genuous.) Probably if you received a story as good as that though, you'd rejeet it. That story you must admit is original as can be and is realistic too. (Maybe I should write a story as good as that one and send it to you, just for laughs.)

As for Sprague's story, I remain unimpressed. (I know, I know, NTOSAT had a similar story in it, but it was more s-f it seemed to me—sailing boats indeed. Snort!) All de Camp did was crank up a rehash of an old story, one I'm familiar with and tired of: the old jump back into history. I want stories of the FUTURE, of subjects not gone over and over ten thousand times in the same old way, same old setting. About the only thing I enjoyed reading and really roared with laughter about was that archer's complaint about being trapped in the barracks with a bunch of perverts. Haw, haw, haw! He should have elucidated yet! Yuk! Gasp! Gurgle!

That a good cover you've got on your maggotzine this month. I really like it. It's a great change over those old pics you used to run, portraying a space-made spaceman attempting to commit venery in the control cabin of a spaceship. (Well don't get mad, dammit! That's what is looked like.) Not that I minded the old ones, mind; it's just that one doesn't display such extracurricular activities for everyone to see. It makes people think the wrong thing!

Yes, in the case of Leigh, you can only counter, "Who cares?" Still, Leigh whacks out fair writing, though I wouldn't say she's all you've pumped her up to be, nor is Bradbury a genius but only a fair writer. I like Brad's work more where he stays away from s-f altogether; his kind of writing was never meant for s-f; I know—I happened across a story of his while glancing through a women's magazine and seeing his name, read the story. It was far better than any of his s-f efforts, and this would probably be the case with Leigh too. An artist doesn't take mud to make a statue, which is the comparison I'm making between the two writings, but will use marble instead. Obviously for them there is no marble in the s-f field.

Snarly rides again, hey? That titillated me for some atavistic reason. The next one you should label "Coyote Howell Rides Again." Ow! (I can see me now, a snarl written across my angular, monstrously handsome features, two sixguns the size of cannons in my spacetanned hands, my mechanical horse jogging along at a mean five hundred per . . .)

So my ancestors should have more been cut down, eh? And you think I can't write a better story than JOURNEY, eh? Well, I say I can,

with one typing hand tied behind me, even! For that I should send you a story, and thusly silence your piteous bleats anent all the "tomes" I'm sending you.

See you around too, Sam! — *Box 445, Olivehurst, Calif.*

So you didn't know I was ingenuous? Shucks, you ain't the only one got cut-down ancestors. One of my ancestors was scalped by ingenues—it was either in Georgia in 1731, or Times Square in 1952, I disremember.

I am touched by your faith that I would unhesitatingly reject a good story—or what you consider a good story. But at the risk of repeating myself, I wish to repeat myself that I am not slanting SS toward a steady diet of fantasy. Trouble is I am beginning to recognize the fact that that literal mind of yours classes everything as fantasy that doesn't have machinery in it. Didn't you read Wally Weber's letter in April, in which he discovered that JOURNEY was pure science fiction? Hah, you could write a better story with one hand tied behind you! Reminds me of Shirley Booth at the opera—she said she could sing better than that with her mouth tied behind her back. All right, durn it, if you're a genius, prove it! Send in a—what am I saying? No, no, not that! We'll even look up Kris Neville. . . .

CANINE TALK

by Richalex Kirs,
The Cosmontrolatra of Talamaya

Dear Mr. Mines: If someone told me that I would love a dirty dog prior to the April ish of SS trembling in my hands, I would have unrestrainedly pronounced him nuts. However, I might as well admit it, I love you.

Once upon a time my father offered to buy me a sooper-dooper 'lectric train. I refused, being forced to keep up the facade of being a stfan and immune to such things. Now I am ready to reconsider. The reason? The cover. Never in all my fifteen years have I seen such a beautiful design for a railroad layout. Is it copyrighted or something? Do y'know that the big machine busily chewing into the plateau is an almost exact painting of the ice-chomper as described in "The Planet Mender" in Tws? Just what is it doing on SS, and why? Is Bergy or Schomburg or whatchacicallim to blame, or did your art department get mixed up?

I wish to Ghu (and Foo-foo too) that all this gabble about sex would cease, and I mean CEASE. Whatsamadda wid sex, anyhow? I like it, and so does anybody else, male and female, who doesn't have rocks in his/her head.

Marion Zimmer Bradley is a good friend of mine, in fact, she's my oldest correspondent, and I have had a long and informative friendship with her.

Nevertheless, She is nuts, COMPLETELY nuts, when she says, " . . . Our own planet will be sufficient, for a million years, to perfect man's knowledge of himself." Granted that she has a point in her argument, in this statement she is throwing caution to the wind. Man's knowledge of himself will never be perfect. It can not and shall not be, ever, million years or no. Postulate her own argument, give man a million years on Earth in which to study his actions and reactions to every given position, civilized or uncivilized, that the Earth is capable of presenting, and where is her "perfected knowledge"? MAN WOULD NOT KNOW A SINGLE THING OF HIS REACTIONS OR CAPABILITIES IN SPACE OR ON OTHER PLANETS, AND THUS WOULD BE RIGHT BACK WHERE HE STARTED, IN 1950 OR THEREABOUTS. However strange and impossible to her the actual thought of space-flight in the near future may be, it is an important step and the eventual outcome of man's technological and industrial evolution, if continued at the present rate. Also, there can be no "full maturity" in any race, simply because such a condition would mean that evolution and progress had stopped completely. Such a condition could be described only as DEATH.

Getting off that track, and back to the present, I would like to compliment you, Samuel Mines, for the excellent job that you have done with SS. Merwin's abrupt departure hurt me to the core (he wrote the most delightful pomes!) and left a great void in my pinched little breast, but you have done much to relieve it. The reason that I call you a dirty dog is that you have made it imperative that I buy every copy of SS and TWS from now on, if only to see if you start to decline. Somehow I don't think you will. — *1441 Overing Street, Bronx 61, N.Y.*

P.S. I almost forgot—This is my first letter that I have ever written to a prozine that has been published. Or don't you take hints?

That cover was a personal inspiration of Alex Schomburg's and we knew it would delight the heart of all true electric train dispatchers. It's one of a series we decided to try which illustrate no story in the issue, but are either abstractions or tell a story of their own. But already in the works are some more conventional covers illustrating stories. Examples: a new-style Bergey illustrating an unusual first novel—THE LOVERS—by Philip Farmer for August and a brand new artist, Walter Popp, bringing a new look to SS with September's feature—BIG PLANET—by Jack Vance.

As to your other remarks, we have only one dignified comment to offer: Woof, woof!

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGES

by Henry Moskowitz

Mines Sam (I liked that a lot.): I've been feeling rather down in the mouth—or morose—for the last couple of weeks. Two weeks ago today—I shall always remember that day—I bought the April ish of our own SS, and I saw that you didn't print my letter.

But I can understand you not doing so, for when that rating is taken away there wasn't much left, was there? I still have two other letters, though,

that might see print in your haloed pages, just might. And there's the letter I sent to you at TWS, too.

Then, maybe this will get printed, because of its shortness.

My second reason for my feeling low is again your fault, or so I think. I came in to see you last Saturday, and you weren't there. Why? Because it was the day after Washington's birthday, or because you are never there on Saturday? You should've warned me. Tsk! Tsk!

One year ago, to the month, you gave us a de Camp novel in TWS, and now you give us another. Thank you, Sir.

Bow your head in deep shame, Sam. You did something for which I will never forgive you. Since the very first isue, SS has had always a fan mag review. For the first time it has been absent from the columns of SS. Why'd you do it? Et tu, Bruta. (or words to that effect.)

Even though this issue has been thoroughly enjoyable—as have all this year's ishs—, WHEN DO YOU INTEND TO PUBLISH A STF NOVEL? SS is a stf mag, you know.

Glad to see Schomburg on the cover. This time his work reminds me very strongly of artist Frank R. Paul's.

Now that you know why you didn't receive that usual three-pager from yours truly, I can say: Keep up the good work, Sam. All is forgiven. — *Three Bridges, New Jersey.*

This down in the mouth—you been biting ducks?—desolates us with compassion. We've published two of your letters in various places, each of which asked about Saturdays and to each of which we replied that the office was firmly closed. So we thought sure you'd see one of those answers and didn't expect you to wander in and confront the night watchman. Our apologies.

True, true, your letters were a little long for the amount of stuff we were trying to cram into the column those days. Makes me real happy to spot a short letter now and then amidst the usual tomes. Now as to your two questions: Why was the fan review left out? Somehow we've never thought of it as a "must" for every issue, rather a flexible sort of affair: if enough fanzines came in, we'd review them. If not enough came in, we'd just hold them over for the next issue when there'd be a better accumulation. But Jerry says he'll make a special effort to keep them regular. That make you happy?

Now about the novel: I trust by now you've seen George O. Smith's HELLFLOWER, which being space opera in its purest and most pristine form, should give you a smattering of what you're pining for. DRAGON'S ISLAND isn't fantasy either, nor Ken Crossen's PASSPORT TO PAX, nor Philip Farmer's THE LOVERS, nor Vance's BIG PLANET, nor Roger Dee's STAR DICE, nor Fletcher Pratt's THE LONG VIEW. And Bruce Elliott's KINDERGARTEN is only part fantasy. You'll see all these, from beginning to end, in the next seven months or so.

Say, where is Three Bridges anyway? Is that where Singac blends into Mountain View?

FREEZEUP
by David Goodfellow

Dear Sam: You don't mind if I call you Sam, do you? It sounds so much friendlier than "Editor" or "Mr. Mines," and even though what I have to say won't sound exactly chummy, I hope I don't antagonize anybody too much.

The story I want to run through the mill is THE GLORY THAT WAS, your feature novel for April's SS, by L. Sprague de Camp. I think I should inform you that the opinion of some of the local fans is that it "stinks on ice." I regret to say that I agree with them. The idea of landing back in ancient Greece is fascinating to say the least, but to have it turn out to be merely a fake is quite a letdown. I may sound kind of crude, but I think a little more bloodletting would have helped it out, even after the *first* letdown. I think, however that it had one very interesting point, the one on the last page, that we ourselves, in this world, might be a fake.

The other stories I thought were pretty good, particularly the short, WELCOME TO LUNA, by Charles E. Fritch.

I usually pick a mag by the cover, if I haven't time to look at the contents. Now I'm not so sure that's such a good idea. If the cover of the forementioned issue has anything to do with any one of its stories, I didn't read it as carefully as I think I did. How about having the cover illustrating one of the better stories, huh? — *Wenatchee, Washington.*

We thought the idea of landing in ancient Greece was an interesting idea ourselves; furthermore we were intrigued with the brashness of a writer who proposed to write dialogue for characters like Socrates. And when de Camp actually carried it off we thought it was just too clever a performance to have you miss. Whether it turned into a fake or not at the end was relatively unimportant; it was just a means of winding up the story and the only other alternative was actual time travel—would that have been any better? No, it seems to us that making it a fraud added the final fillip of cosmic humor to the whole wry satire. It's not a very obvious story, but it'll grow on you, Dave, it'll grow on you.

OOPS—IT'S OOPSLA
by Gregg Calkins

Dear Sam: Goshwowgeewhizoboyoboyoboy! I'm talking about the cover, of course. Wonderful! Terrific! I like it, I like it! I can't find a signa-

ture on it anywhere, but I presume it to be Bergey —looks like him, anyway. This is the type of scene I really rave over when I find one on a s-f mag cover. They are all too rare, believe me. 'Pears to me, Sam, that you have really been good to us on the cover score, recently. For instance, there's the Spring FANTASTIC STORY which was pretty terrific, and the April TWS which was . . . . . well, there are so many overworked adjectives, that when one really needs one they are all so trite. But they are the kind that make you want to buy the mag for the cover alone. And now you do it on SS, too. Thanks, Sam. Thanks a lot.

Delving inside the magazine, we come to good old TEV, the department for which the mag is published, with a few old novels and stuff to make it look plausible to non-fen. This is truly a magnificent department this time. The letters are all interesting, well written, well selected and well presented. Upon counting them, I find 22 letters printed. Upon comparing this with some other mags, I find 20 in Planet, and 22 again in FFM. These are the only other two mags that come anywhere's near you in regards to letters printed. I'll make no bones about it, Sam—I think you're doing a pretty darn swell job.

So we read the Editorial. This question of sex is rearing its head again, we see. Ah, yes. In some respects this is a childish and stupid question, but in others it is quite necessary for open discussion at this time. To have *no* sex in science fiction seems to have been the aim of s-f writers up to now. It's readable, and it's acceptable that way. Moreover, it seems to be in demand. However, if you have to deliberately change the story simply to omit sex, it's plain silly. On the other hand, to use an overdose of sex in a s-f is just as stupid. In that case, the main theme is no longer science fiction but sex. The only safe course seems to be down the middle. So, Sam, let's have sex where it fits and comes in naturally. If you have to work to get it in, it's out of place. If you have to work to keep it out, it's stilted. Keep it natural—it is, you know. Examples are that wonderful story in the January SS, "JOURNEY TO BARKUT," and the excellent GO Smith story, "THE PLANET MENDER" in the April TWS.

Just for the record—to my way of thinking you haven't yet published an immoral (sic) illustration or a sordid story, and I don't think you ever will. As you say, ". . . in a rough way your own good taste tells you what is acceptable" and I have perfect faith in your good taste. (However, this doesn't mean I always agree with your choice of stories!)

Back to the issue itself—the magazine issue, that is. I have a big fat gripe coming up! WHERE WAS JERRY BIXBY AND HIS FMZ REVIEW? Where? What a low blow that was, Sam. At least you could have written a short note in the editorial to let us know what happened. (By the way, just what *did* happen?) And before I forget, another note on the cover—what is that sphere to the upper left of the earth if the big mining machine is on Luna? Earle? Nevertheless, a superb cover.

I am not (yet) so conceited that I imagine it is *all* my doing, but I hope I had a hand in having you look into adding the date of the next issue to the contents page. At least, after my letter you printed you *did* mention the fact in connection with me. At the time this letter is being written, I haven't seen the change, but I hope Production gives the ok. It sure will help, Sam.

Winding up this missile, we wonder where Finlay was this issue? Not a sign of him. We also look forward quite hopefully for "THE HELL-FLOWER" by Smith. Can it tie the January novel? If so, it's got to really be something. Rest assured—you'll hear from me about it one way or another.

Comes the commercial, Sam. You know OOPSLA? That's my fmz. It's coming right along. Still only 10c per, and I'd sure appreciate a few dimes for a sample copy. I don't want any more than that for a first timer, because I know all of the fen won't appreciate it, and I don't want to rob them. *No* fanzine is worth more than a dime or two for a first sample copy. But I *would* like to hear from any or all interested. Yes?

I'm leaving, Sam, but I'll be back. Bouquet's will be in order, or . . . . . brickbats! We'll see with the May issue. —*761 Oakley Street, Salt Lake City 16, Utah.*

That was Alex Schomburg on the cover, not Bergey. The name got itself clipped off, but I thought sure you'd recognize the style. That little sphere above the earth? That's an artificial satellite, old boy, the gizmo that makes all this heavy machinery on the moon possible.

I am appalled by your actually counting the letters in TEV—you're not judging by quantity alone, are you? Of course it makes it nice and cozy and you get to know quite a lot of people that way but we do have to reserve a few pages for the old novels and stuff. You seem to agree with us on the sex angle. No, it'll never be dragged in for its own sake, in case anyone is worried. Be seeing you.

YOURS GROUCHILY

by John Daves Roberts

Dear Mr. Mines: Thanks for a fine combination. De Camp comes up with a pleasant unmemorable story which is needed at times to leaven the ones you can't forget and the ones you wish you could forget. Only perfect plotting and avoidance of speculation can achieve this easy dose and De Camp (as well as Pratt—who taught who?) has it down pat.

THE LAST DAYS OF SHANDAKOR is another matter. It brings up a matter that may be touchy to you—I don't know. It is this. STARTLING is a pulp magazine, but on most occasions avoids the typical mark of pulp quality in the stories. But the earmarks are all over Brackett's shamefully careless story. The story moves, but that is the only quality that it has which I can call good. Everyone behaves childishly—this is not bad in itself—but the business of having everyone behave childishly is obviously a convenience to avoid having to work out character. No one ever even thinks. Only feeling, which without thought is genuinely stereotyped, exists. Therefore all is

reduced to an animal level. This is not intentional, I guess, but an automatic result of the failure to bother creating human (or Martian) beings. I won't just say failure to create, for the indifference exhibited throughout is a personal insult to anyone who buys the magazine. It says, "You're a sucker, and dumb to boot." So it is in a part from you too, Mr. Mines or Sam. (I would call you Sam from the beginning, but I must have known from the start that I would say something like the preceding sentence.)

The shorts range from good, "THE INTRUDER," to average, "WELCOME TO LUNA".

Sorry to have to grouch, but that is a good way to get me to write, I guess. I didn't write about how much I enjoyed JOURNEY TO BARKUT or VULCAN'S DOLLS. Anyway I had the feeling that Vulc had been cut a little too much. Can't get away from a grouch, can I? I guess you need it, though. I'm still buying, though and may write again the next time Leigh Brackett sells you one. — *Box 84, Choccolocco, Alabama.*

So much heat over Brackett, who is pretty universally liked, fills us with misgivings. Is this an emotional reaction—the very thing you spurn? We've always considered Brackett quite a craftsman, and "sloppy" is not an adjective we would knowingly apply to her work.

Furthermore, after wearing our head to the bone in the never-ending search for good stories, we resent the idea that we would consider the reader a sucker and mentally snicker at having put one over on him. This is the very opposite of the prevailing atmosphere. Fact, we're thinking of inviting you up here for a week, just to listen to the wails and groans as we wade through the day's slush pile of incoming stories. But it's nice to know you liked JOURNEY and VULCAN'S DOLLS. If you responded to them, all is not yet lost. Will warn you when the next Brackett is due.

REPORT FROM ISRAEL
by Maxime R. Goldenhirsch

Dear Sir: Only a few words of appreciation of your Mag and your sister-publication TWS.

I think it will please you to know that Science-Fiction generally, and the better Mags particularly, are very much appreciated here. As a matter of fact, whatever 'zines are still on the market, date way back, some of them to 1938! And they are sold from hand to hand.

The Israeli Fan (Genus: Fan, class: average) is in his twenties, of some specialized profession, and comes from Europe. He is too, every bit as wild after the field as his American brothers.

Would it be too much to ask you to publish in your letter column my following request? Due to Stringent Currency Regulations, all literature imports have been forbidden. We suffer strongly from this, and I would appreciate it if some of your readers should send me their Mags, once read. I am not in a position to pay (due to the a.m. restrictions) but I shall willingly send stamps, any local publication, or otherwise come to a suitable arrangement. Thanks in advance.

In my opinion, SS, TWS and a certain competiting Mag of high standing define decidedly what is "better quality" in Magazine Science Fiction today. —*P.O.B. 11, Tel-Aviv, Israel.*

Maybe somebody could make a young fortune by going out to Tel-Aviv with a shipload of 1938 STARTLINGS. But we hope some fans come to your rescue with their old numbers—we ourselves do not keep any on hand. And it is flattering to know that SS and TWS are known and considered desirable that far east. Good luck.

AND COMPLIMENTS
by Martin Gross

Dear Editor: Onowlookahere . . . When are you boys going to realize that de Camp is the epitome of hack writers? His trite stories, stereotyped characters, and tired cliches are boring, annoying and cloying. The Yonkers resident, Diksen talks like a refugee from a Steinbeck novel, without those characteristics that make Steinbeck's people real. And the English professor, migawd, wanting a cup of tea, in "the Golden Age of Greece." And deCamp's use of foreign tongues. Whassamatter with Portuguese, or is that for the spacelanes exclusively? One thing about de Camp, he's liberal. Most of the celestial bodies are named after central figures in Greek and Roman mythology, so what does our boy do? He robs the Ramayana and the Mahâbhârata of India for his own star-cluster. Another thing about de Camp that's annoying. His preoccupation with monarchs, oligarchs, patriarchs, and anarchs, smacks of love of pageantry. Maybe he should be made Philossplendarchograph of Qfltosminãos, largest province on Indra, second planet of Manu. the bright star.

Having drawn and quartered L. Sprague de Camp to satisfaction, Torquemada awaits the next victim. . . .

With pipes skirling, the gaily decked caravan heralded its approach into Jona, ancient capital of the Lower Canals. Ancient Jona, old before the building of Sodom and Gomorrah, patiently waited. It could wait, the wait of another hour was nothing to Jona, who had waited for centuries. In the taverns and khans of the New City, the mixed races of Mars, waited. . . . Well, if you like this stuff, it's your choice. The writer's descriptions of the "old cities" of Mars, are reminiscent of Iran. One last thing, Leigh Brackett is consistent. Every story is about an archeologist, or anthropologist, who goes into the forbidden ancient city, or temple, and encounters the Elder Race, who through some machine, or drug of the Gods, make themselves visible to the Earth scientist, who now becomes King of Mars, or God of the Sword, with some Celtic name, usually Irish.

Brian Boru now falls in love with the temple priestess, or princess, who can't visualize the dead seas of Mars, "for verily, I have before me truth to the opposite, look yon, stranger with the red hair, look yon, tell me, with thine own lips, tell me

what you see. Dearest princess, I see before me, waves of blue, and ships upon thosc waves, bearing. . . ." And a Fitzgerald short is following. With the aid of the princess, and abetted by a thief, who is the first to discover the true identity of god or king, but wants the treasure hordes of the Lost Ones, Brian Boru vanquishes the sleiamz, a snake-likc race with mystic powers. He then comes back to the present, still hearing the skirling of the pipes.

The INTRUDER is a rehash of the old tale of Mittleuropa. The "doppleganger," a man's double who forces him to commit suicide, and usurps the possessions of the man.

WELCOME TO LUNA, best story in this issue. Nice ending.

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING . . . good idea, except for the alien. Stf has matured sufficiently for the presenting of an alien. There is no need for the alien to be a BEM. Of course, the last line of deCamp's effort was the idea.

THE ETHER VIBRATES. The first letter exhumes those following. I have a bone to pick with Norman G. Browne. He is proud of the fact that his sister has trouble pronouncing words that are not usually used in conversation. Then, towards the end of his piece of wisdom, he admits he can't pronounce such proper nouns as Heinlein, Leinster, Van Vogt, Phobos, Deimos, Areturus, etc. This boy was complimented by his sister when she called him a Pithecanthropus Erectus. Then another brilliant statement.—"Why did the ancients give all extra-terrestrial objects and places such horrible sounding namcs—" Pretty indecent of them, old man, after all, they only spoke the language. For your information, those names are the most beautiful in the world. So he's an agnostic pantheist, by choice. A person believing in all gods, and questioning the existence of all. Nuffsed. — *1118 Boynton Ave., New York 72, N.Y.*

This is a straight case of heartburn—close to ulcers. This lad likes nothing—but nothing. Oh well, you can continue buying SS just to hate it.

CLOSE HARMON-Y

by Jim Harmon

Dear Mr. Mines: You were kind, indeed to publish my last letter to STARTLING STORIES. As I sat there savoring its insidious witticisms, gasping at the complex fencing of a brilliant intellect in play, I thought of all the STARTLINGs I had read before—memories seemingly going back to almost prenatal ones. Nice to get a letter in my old favorite, I decided that I was going to write for STARTLING when I was—oh, seven or eight, you know. Maybe I'll completely realize my goal if I'm around long enough. You see, I don't know whether my heart is going to get too tired—or if it will even keep me out of our glorious Armed Forces. "Nervous and irregular heart action"—it's kind of tricky. Some doctors can't spot it. Then, too, I'm something of an accident prone and under battle conditions. . . . But maybe there's a STARTLING STORIES up yonder in the skies. . . .

(*Organ music gently rises to fading climax.*)

But to other things.

Green space. Write in haste, should have the red face.

I agree with your editorial conclusion that sex is an honest part of life and therefore should be an honest part of literature, including science-fiction, but not with some of the stepping stones you used to reach that conclusion. Like-for-instance-take-an-example-such-as: You say that any honest man will admit that the attraction he feels for a good-looking woman is nothing but sex-appeal. Yes, most of it is—most of the attraction in most of the cases, but I don't think *all.* There is such a thing as sense of beauty, which is one of the things that distinguishes Man from his half-brother, the Ape. (They aren't our ancestors but since Man and Ape are descended from the same source, they are our relatives.) To me, one thing that shows that Man is something more than the lower animals is that almost all men would rather have sexual relations with a beautiful woman than a homely one. If the human female's attraction for the male were completely sex-appeal—as it is with lower life forms—a man would just as soon have an ugly woman as a pretty one—since she would be just as female—but except in rare cases this doesn't happen. A man *can* look upon a beautiful woman with a certain degree of objcctivity, as he would a sunset, the sky on a cloudless night with a full moon (the most beautiful thing I have ever seen) or any work of Art created by Man or Nature. I don't say that his feelings may not be coloured by sexual instinct but I believe that it is not entirely limited to it.

As for those science-fantasy stories dealing with perversion which you object to, I don't agree with you. From a personal standpoint, I've read a few and enjoyed some of them. They're just good clean dirty fun. From a literary standpoint, I don't think it is any more honest to ignore abnormal sexual activities than it is to ignore normal ones. Both exist in life, and therefore both should exist in literature since literature is a—admittedly somewhat distorted—reflection of life, and needless to say to unbiased folk, science-fiction is a part of literature. From the standpoint of acceptance, critics have been praising the slicks, particularly the women's magazines, on their growing maturity. One of the examples of the slicks' new maturity is the letting down of their taboos on portraying realistically sexual relations both normal and abnormal. As yet, I haven't heard anyone say that LADIES' HOME JOURNAL should be sold under the counter, and it has run stories dealing with incest, homosexuality, and Lesbianism—to be colloquially redundant. (I feel the hot breath of the blue pencil. You probably can't cven say those words in STARTLING.) You say all people interested in such perversions are violently abnormal? This would include the readers of the LADIES' HOME JOURNAL, most of the popular slicks, and a lot of the pocket-size books. I'll have to watch my mother more closely.

Now, I'd like to be one of the couple of dozen fans to answer Astra's letter.

Look, Marion, Honey, you made a couple of mistakes in facts as well as theory. For instance, California wasn't the last American frontier. You see, we Americans didn't progress Westward in an orderly fashion. We hopped out to California first

and then went back to places like Arizona and Nevada. Then, too, you say Buffalo and Redmen are extinct. Tsk, tsk, I wouldn't have thought you prejudiced . . . thinking all American Indians extinct. I hope even their best friends don't tell them. They would be offended. Of course, there are still bison around—and they are on the increase. I heard that they may be available for commercial breeding in, maybe, ten years.

Speaking of breeding, it is an established fact proven by history that inbreeding is the first sign of decadence. The social unit that tries to be self-sufficient destroys itself. So you want the whole world to be an ingrown socio-politico unit without any frontiers. If frontiers do draw mis-fits, it looks like you would want ones to exist to drain off some. After all, it's the misfits who cause wars, commit ax murders and kick their mothers-in-law down the stairs, as well as blaze new frontiers in territory, science, and art for the benefit of Mankind.

Here arises the question as whether it's bad to be a misfit. It seems to me that it might be better to have the courage of your convictions—pardon the cliche—and to try to change your environment to fit your ideas rather than "adopt to your environment" because of intellectual and physical laziness. And if it is unfortunate to be a misfit personally, it is fortunate for the human race that they exist.

As Sam Mines says, the exploration of space will increase Man's store of knowledge as well as his physical frontiers, but more than this, it will increase Man's range of experience, and as his range of experience increases his range of thought increases. New experience makes new concepts possible. I believe this will help raise Man further up the evolutionary scale.

Then there's one other thing. This world will eventually end, and if the human race never leaves it, it will end with it. But if Man does go out to the planets and the stars, he or his evolutionary descendants might go on truly forever. Being a romanticist, a science-fiction fan, and a human being with a racial survival instinct, this appeals to me.

Seems to me Marion, that you are going through a stage that many stf fans pass through. You've come to the conclusion that anyone with as fine a mind as yours (not being cynical) shouldn't waste it on pulp magazines but devote yourself to more widely accepted literature. It's more intellectual. Some people can get over this phase by going out and hoisting a few. With others it takes years and some never get over it. But then, some people are so mature that they never grow-up enough to realize how adult Alice-in-Wonderland is.

Oh, Marion not believing in, Ad Astra makes
me reach aspirin,
In case, you are wondering about these little
rhyming couplets:
Samuel Mines is very smart man but he not know
what hit him.
To find out, should try singing Calipso rhythm.

Ted Sturgeon is better at it. I'm more the Ezio Pinza type—vocally. Physically, I look like Mario Lanza.

In closing, I must mention your cutting of my remark in my last letter saying that FIND THE SCULPTOR was my favorite story. Such modesty! Best example of a literature of ideas that I can think of.—*427 E. 8th Street, Mt. Carmel, Ill.*

So this time I couldn't resist and left the last sentence in. Shows that every man has his price, huh?

About our disagreement on sex appeal—you say there is such a thing as a sense of beauty, which may cause a man to admire a beautiful woman without any thought of sex. Yeh, maybe, but I think his judgment of what is beautiful is affected by his interest in her sexually. There is nothing objectively beautiful about the female form; it is out of proportion, being too prominent in hip and breast, too narrow in the shoulder, too heavy in the thighs and too short of leg. The long-stemmed beauties of calendars exist mostly in the artist's imagination; the average actual female tends to be dumpy. Yet men find them beautiful; even though they must compromise the dream of perfect beauty they can still get excited about the available female. You prove it yourself when you say that men are more attracted sexually to a beautiful woman than a homely one. Why? Because you are using the word "beautiful" in place of "sexually attractive."

A sense of beauty does not exist in a vacuum. It is tempered by your training. Thus a Ubangi woman, with elongated neck and stretched lower lip, is tremendously attractive sexually to a Ubangi male, and undoubtedly beautiful as well, where she would be neither to you. Well, we'd better both take to the storm cellars for this day's work, we've put our feet in it.

PERSONS WHO PERSPIRE

by Richard E. Geis

Dear Mr. Mines, Your editorial on sex in the April issue was very interesting indeed. Are you trying to tell us that henceforth our fearless heroes will no longer spurn the passionate embraces of willing slave girls in order to win the heart of the neurotic Queen? Will the bewitching form of illicit sex rear upward to taint our linen white hemen? Are you saying that we will soon read stories about really human characters who act like you and me and Joe Mushmouth who lives across the street? Will the second or third strongest instinct in man finally be allowed to exist, however faintly, in the pure and hallowed pages of SS and TWS?

There was something in the editorial about dealing ". . . honestly with their problems, their characters and motives—and be limited by good taste." Whose good taste judges these stories? What do you mean by "good" taste? In short, Mr. Mines, how many taboos are you planning on kicking over? You can't blithely drop a bombshell like that in our midst and not expect to be more specific on certain points.

Did you ever notice that in most science-fiction stories where "character" is allowed to develop, the villain is usually the most believable? The author is allowed to give him thoughts of sex, money,

power, in short to make him a very real person. This was permissable because he always got it in the neck in the end. Hmm, that last doesn't sound quite right. Anyway, the heroes by comparison are eunuch-like saints who behave as we're told people should behave, act as people ought to act, and always do the right thing while us common peasants almost always serve ourselves first, and rationalize later. If you are planning on peopling the pages with persons who perspire, then I am with you to the end and I will cheer you all the way.

But, will your publisher allow it? Will your readers allow it? Have you overestimated the "maturity" of the buyers of your magazines? Only time will tell. Perhaps you too will follow that other Mr. M into the ranks of Has-Been Editors.

I'm really glad I subscribed last month. This will be a very interesting test period.

I'm afraid I raise an eyebrow at the use of "bustard" in THE GLORY THAT WAS by L. Sprague de Camp. What kind of honesty is that? Everyone who reads the word knows what it's supposed to be. Why not print the word correctly or stop prattling about "Honesty" and "Literature". Comstock *is* dead, you know. — *2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon.*

Get the eyebrow down and we'll try to answer some of those eager, childlike questions. Will our heroes no longer spurn the passionate embraces of willing slave girls . . .? This will be largely governed by the way the author feels about slave girls. We are not giving any authors orders such like: in situations where there are slave girls who are willing your hero will not be a schmo, but will take full and immediate advantage of the situation. This would be stifling artistic integrity. If Murray Leinster is slightly shocked at the prospect we don't aim to corrupt him. On the other hand we're not going to frustrate any George O. Smiths or Bruce Elliotts who operate under a different set of rules. The second or third strongest instinct in man (and woman?) will be allowed to exist—but faintly—in SS and TWS. Limited by whose taste? Who else? You're stuck with me, kid, at least until I follow that other Mr. M. into another time sequence.

So you don't know what a bustard is? You should have your mind washed with Tide. A bustard is a large European bird related to both the cranes and plovers—an ungainly critter. The trouble with this business is the people who examine everything for a double meaning. Aren't you ashamed?

VOICE OF DESPAIR
by Tony Glynn

Dear Editor: Being a keen reader of SS and TWS, when I can get my hands on any copies, I've decided that I too, have a right to add my voice to

[*Turn page*]

TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write
but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

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the general hubbub of TEV. If I start by saying "I like your mag!' you will no doubt murmer "This guy's buttering me up so I'll print his letter." Nevertheless I'm going to start with saying: "I like your mag." in fact, "I LIKE YOUR MAG.!" I like your stories (most of them), I like your illustrations (likewise most of them), and how I love TEV!

I follow the letters with smiles and scowls, murmers of approval and grunts of disapproval. Some of the signatures on the letters are the names of old friends to me, although I've only ever met them in yours, and other letter sections. Yes, I enjoy TEV. But, I've got an axe to grind—a large one, too, and all British fans will back me up, I'm sure. "BACK ME UP, BRITISH FANS. D'YOU HEAR?" Sit back, old man, and open your BEM-ish ears to my howl.

"WHAT ABOUT THIS BRITISH EDITION?"

Have you ever seen the so-called "British Editions" of SS and TWS Ed.? They don't appear regularly, just once in a while. I gave up buying them long ago, but here are the details of the last one I bought. First there was the Bergey cover (natch.) and then the novel, Jones' "CYBERNETIC BRAINS", followed by the Captain Future short, "HARPERS OF TITAN". That's all! No illustrations except the heading for the novel, no book reviews, and NO TEV! I ask you Ed., and I appeal to your readers, suppose you went out one shining morn to buy your SS and had such a travesty foisted off on you. Revolt would sweep the ranks of fandom, and justly so. Don't try to say it's the best you can do Ed. Certain of your competitors are putting out British Editions with all the stories, illustrations, and departments. They cost more—twice the price of the BE's of SS and TWS, but I'm willing to pay that price for a similar edition of your mags. Think of the British following you would gather too.

As for me, I scorn that pale copy of the genuine article, calling itself the "British Edition" of SS. I prefer to mooch about second-hand bookshops in search of U.S. editions, and upon finding one, carry it home rejoicing, regardless of its age.

So be it, Ed., I've squawked my squawk. Perhaps you will pay heed to it, then again you may consign it to the tender mercies of New York's garbage collectors, by way of your wastebasket.

Closing now. Going off in quest of those rare U.S. issues, Y'know.

Sorry I called you a BEM in my wrath. I'm sure you are really a very nice chap.

Hey! I heard you! You said: "The nerve of this Limey! He blows his top about BE's, insulting me into the bargain, and then starts buttering me up again!!"

All right! All right! But strictly speaking, you oul' spalpeen, I'm not a Limey.

Best wishes to you, SS, and the fans. — *144 Beresford St. Moss Side, Manchester 14, Eng.*

You have a problem, old boy, but the solution is an easy one. A subscription to SS will cost you $3.00, plus 75c for overseas mailing and you can laugh at the British austerity program. Ditto for TWS. And being able to wallow in TEV each month, just think of the battles you'll be able to get into!

We've gotta go. There are letters left over it desolates us to leave. There's a plea for correspondents from A.B. King of 163 Devonshire Ave. Southsea, Portsmouth, Hants, England, a grumble from Joe Semenovich, the old star traveler, who didn't like GLORY THAT WAS, a rave about GLORY THAT WAS from Bill St. John, some more squawks about Jim Blish from Bill Tuning, a rave from Lee Huddleston that was so fulsome we didn't dare print it, a "no" vote on sex in stf from Gerald Steward, a gripe about WELL OF THE WORLDS from Paul Blake and a Hail to Thee, Blithe Spirit from Jim Leake, who disagrees with Marion Bradley, plus the announcement of a new fanzine to be called FANTASTIC WORLDS, edited by Ed Ludwig and selling for two bits a copy. You'll see a review of it when the first copy comes in.

See you all next month.

—*The Editor*



THE SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSIC YOU'VE WAITED FOR!

•

SLAN

By A. E. VAN VOGT

In the Summer FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE!

REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

RECEIVED a leaflet advertising Don Day's *Index to the Science-Fiction Magazines 1926-1950,* and herewith pass on to you the many reasons why you will probably drool over it:

The *Index* lists every stf and fantasy magazine published during that period (48 titles; over 1275 issues); every story that appeared in those magazines—date of issue, page, and approximate length—cross-indexed by title and



author; verified pseudonyms, and gobs of other stfacts; in all, over 20,000 entries, on 8½ by 11 pages in buckram binding. Day calls it "the most important book in 25 years of science fiction," and from the fan's point of view he couldn't be righter. Priced at $6.50, from Perri Press, Box 5007, Portland 13, Oregon.

Next, a note from Jan D. Romanoff, assistant editor of FANTASTIC WORLDS, a stf "little magazine" soon to make its appearance . . . we quote:

"FANTASTIC WORLDS will be a lithographed 5½ by 8½ quarterly. We'll be using off-trail weird, fantasy and science fiction, preferably from 500 to 2500 words, of types not readily found in the established magazines . . . satire and philosophical overtones are especially desired, although we hope, too, for humorous material.

"Articles will feature background material in the fields of fantasy and science fiction, such as writer biographies, fan profiles, news of

[*Turn page*]





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publications and organizations in the field. We'll use a limited amount of material on the strange, unknown and supernatural.

"We want FANTASTIC WORLDS to appeal not only to active stf fans but also to a larger group of readers who, while interested in imaginative material, remain inactive in fan affairs. We hope to develop into a professional-type magazine which can provide a stepping stone for newer writers and a place where established authors may shed their inhibitions.

"Payment is in the form of cash prizes from 3 to 10 dollars as determined by reader vote. In exceptional cases we may make an additional payment on acceptance. All rights except that of first American serial rights remain the property of the author.

"We are also interested in short poetry, fillers, jokes, cartoons and artwork. Prompt reports will be made on all submissions, and reasons for rejection will accompany returned manuscripts. Sample copies are 25c, a year's subscription $1.00."

We predict that editors Edward W. Ludwig, Ordean A. Hagen, Sam Sackett (hi, Prof!) and Jan Romanoff will be swamped with oceans of 99 44/100 crud; and that they will dredge it carefully and produce a walloping good littlezine.

SLUDGE, 2 Spring Gardens, Southwick, Sussex. Editor: Bob Foster. One issue for one current U. S. A. stf promag, or 1 shilling or twenty cents.

Enclosed with this issue was a note from editor Foster, whose life has been complicated in a manner which we will allow him to describe for himself:

" . . . unfortunately some of the fans who sent in subs did not include their address, I guess they put it on the outside of the wrapping but it got lost in transit. Do you think you could mention this in the review? I feel very guilty not being able to send off their copies of Sludge."

Foster's letter was dated Jan. 15 . . . by this time he's probably taken his guilt feelings to an analyst. We're sure he'll be relieved to hear from those of you who have been expecting to hear from *him*.

This issue of *Sludge* contains fiction by the prolific Peter J. Ridley, Alan Hunter, Dan Morgan and K. E. Smith; features by Morgan and Jane Russell (not *the* bosom; another one); poetry by "Erlik" and J. Bowman. Neatly type-set. *Sludge*, to repeat a bad pun we made a while back, is improving with udge.

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-07 32nd Avenue, Flushing 54, New York. Editor: James V. Taurasi. Published bi-weekly. 10c per copy; 12 issues for $1.00.

We grow a little weary of saying that F-T is

a top-rate fanewszine . . . that it is neat, crisp, up-to-date; so next issue we'll try to think of something else to say.

RAY BRADBURY REVIEW, 4458 56th Street, San Diego, California. Editor and Publisher: William F. Nolan. 50c per issue; no subscriptions accepted.

About as nifty an item as we've seen . . . well-styled, capably illustrated, beautifully printed by photo-offset. Mr. Nolan is one of our most vocal Bradburyphiles, and he had spared no effort in this tribute to, and critical appreciation of, RB.

TRBR contains three articles and a short story by the Master himself, and Bradburyana by Frank Anmar, Lasca Huebner, Anthony Boucher, Henry Kuttner, Roger Nelson, Marilyn Venable, Sam Sackett, editor Nolan, Chad Oliver, Jack Traub and Ian Macauley; also a handful of book reviews of *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man*, three satires on RB's style, and a well-rounded index to his published works.

In his editorial, Nolan explains that " . . . this is the first and last issue of the RAY BRADBURY REVIEW since no more than one issue will be devoted to an author . . . in successive issues authors like Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Henry Kuttner, and A. E. van Vogt will be presented . . . if plans materialize we hope to honor all those outstanding men and women in the professional field, who by their exceptional efforts, have given modern science-fantasy a firmly established position in our literary society."

If this first issue is any sample, we hope those plans manage to materialize.

THE PENDULUM, 610 Park Place, Pittsburgh 9, Pennsylvania. Editor: Bill Venable. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy; one year's subscription for $1.00

A first issue . . . and a better than average one, due, no doubt, to the fact that its editors are old hands at fan-publishing.

Poetry by Raymond L. Clancy and Philip Duke; fiction by—*again?*—Peter J. Ridley. Also present: Derek Pickles; F. Merk Ryan and Karen Kurz (revicwing English propubs); C. Stewart Metchette and Walt Willis (jousting with stf movies); and G. M. Carr, whose epic poem *Sir Hudibras in Fandom* we don't know enough about fandom to make a great deal of sense out of . . .

With the above sentence sinking slowly below the horizon, we move on to—

MEZRAB, Box 246, Rochester, Texas. Editors and Publishers: Marion and Robert Bradley. Published quarterly. 20c per copy; six issues for $1.00.

Interesting, as always . . . and a wee bit on the esoteric side. Contains editorials by the Bradleys, a fancy mood-piece by Richalex Kirs, some remarks on "changclings" by Ken Slater, some philosophical mutterings by the male Bradley, four poems, many letters of serious mien, a thumbnail analysis of the perennial adventure yarn from Homer to Hopalong, and some comments on gravity by Fernand Roussel.

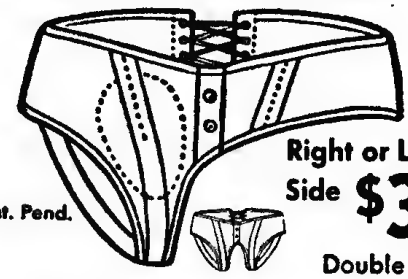
Re the Roussel article: since when has the

[*Turn page*]

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surface of Venus been "shrouded in solid ice," and since when has its atmosphere been found to consist of or include "a very large envelope of water vapor?" To the best of our knowledge, Venus' surface, even the so-called night side if you choose to deny that it rotates, is nearer the boiling-point than the freezing—while water vapor, if any at all is present, is in such low concentration as to be indetectable through the vapor content of our own atmosphere . . . hardly enough to ice-bind the planet, even under freezing temperatures if such existed. The actual facts may be something else again; we personally won't make any positive statements on the matter until we've read the reports of the 1st Venus Expedition; but in the meantime we'd be interested in seeing any evidence that exists for Mr. Roussel's statements about "ice" and "water vapor." Also: since when does a "gas placed in a . . . vacuum tube . . . and restrained from to and fro motion . . . rise to the top of the tube?" We always thought that it expanded evenly to fill the tube . . . and what is this "to and fro" motion that must be restrained? Molecular motion? Restrain that, and you've got a liquid . . . at the bottom of the tube. Also: we'd love to see evidence that "only atmospheric pressure, caused by the impingement of contiguous planetary, stellar and galactic fields, can cause the relative downward motion of gaseous substances."

ASMODEUS, 1475 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York. Editors: Henry W. Chabot and Alan Pesetsky. 15c per copy; four for 50c.

At the top of the contents page is a neatly-put thought which we enjoyed, to wit: "Take an interest in the future; that's where you'll spend the rest of your life."

H. B. Fyfe leads off with a cute yarn entitled *Incomplete Data;* on his heels are Milton Rothman, Robert Rosen, Robert Silverberg, Jerome Bixby, Joe Gross and Mack Reynolds . . . all enjoyable, the Rothman, Rosen, Silverberg, Gross and Reynolds pieces especially so. The Bixby, we thought, could have stood a careful blue-pencil job. . . .

As one writer we know never said: "After I've sold a story, I lock myself in my Bendix until it appears in print . . . otherwise, I'd get to thinking and thinking and thinking, and pretty soon I'd run like hell to a telephone, call the editor, and holler, 'Hol-l-ld it, Horace . . . stop the press! *I wanta revise!"*

Poems by Raymond L. Clancy, Robert Briney, C. A. Smith, Jose Maria Maestre, Lin Carter and Jerry F. Cao; editorials by Chabot and Pesetsky; artwork by Chabot, Rosen, Bixby, Gross and P. Picasso; published by Pesetsky; cover printed by Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.

Nice job.

At this juncture we toyed, for a moment, with the notion of reviewing a completely imaginary fanzine . . . just for kicks. "Stories by Heinlein, del Rey, Bradbury, van Vogt and Ridley; articles by Ley, Clarke, Coupling and Silverberg; art by Bok, Finlay, Cartier and Chabot." Then we realized that oh so many

of you would burn the midnight oil writing to a phony address for copies, subscriptions, et al, and later on, devising horrible ways to render Bixby deceased . . . so we decided not to. Aren't you glad?

VIEWS IN SF (Bulletin Number Four of the Baltimore Science Fiction Forum), 802 W. 35th Street, Baltimore 11, Maryland. Editor: Ray J. Sienkiewicz. Published on the 15th of each month. 5c per copy; 10 issues for 50c (that figures).

Very neatly typed and mimeographed, this impresses us as being a good nickel's worth. Dick Clarkson, the Forum's President, chats briefly on Forum doings; the Forum's Librarian, Gary Kratz, reviews a book from ye clubbe librarye; Allen "Amy" Newton *(Amy?—JB)* reports on U. S. and foreign stfnews, revealing that a deluxe edition of weird art by an Australian weird artist will be published shortly . . . *bound in bat's skin!* The price is $25.00 . . . and the hell with it. More magazine and book reviews by Herbert Kushner, Ellen Kahn, Steve Wren, A. M. Keyhoe; a story by Allan Danoff; a poem by Henry Ackerman; a biography of Donald Wollheim by Danoff; letters.

A nice unpretentious little 'zine, with but one major flaw; i. e. "nonstoparagraphing,"

that blight upon legibility,

that scourge of pleasurable fanzine reading,

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Well, that's it for this trip . . . see you next month.

—*JEROME BIXBY*

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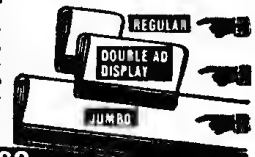
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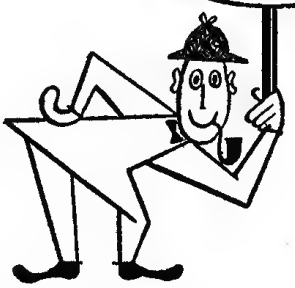
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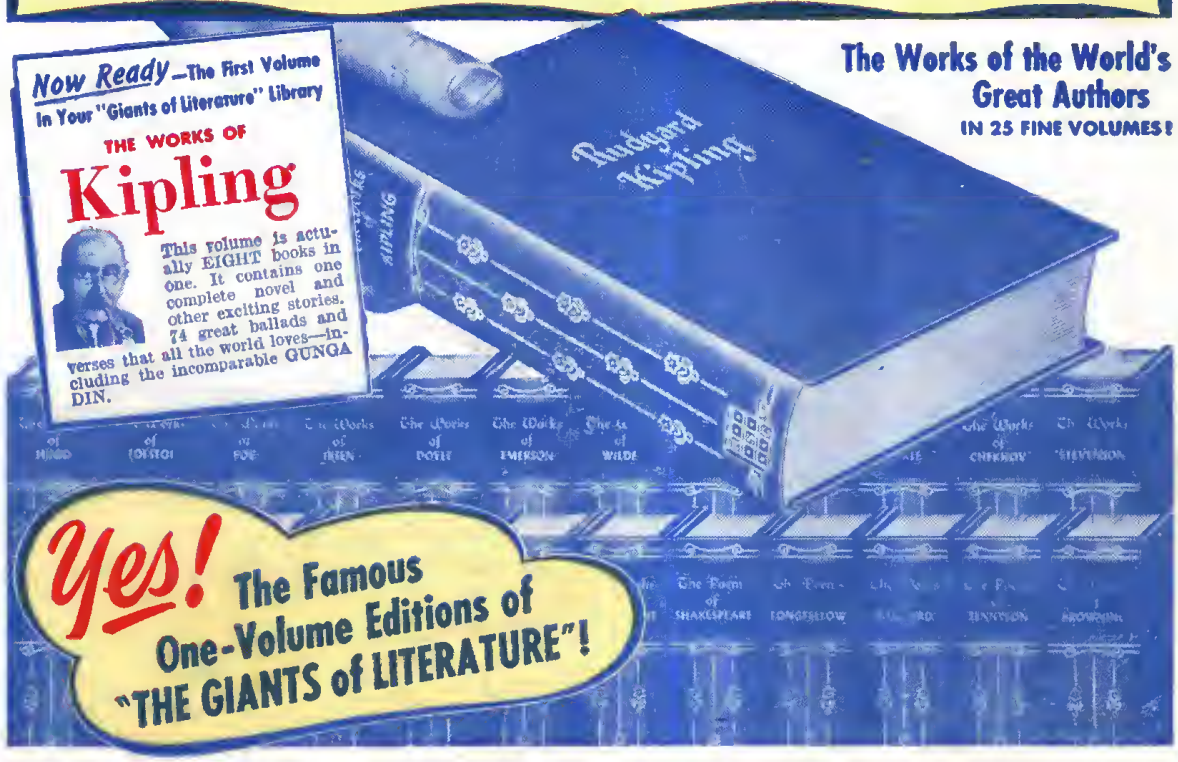
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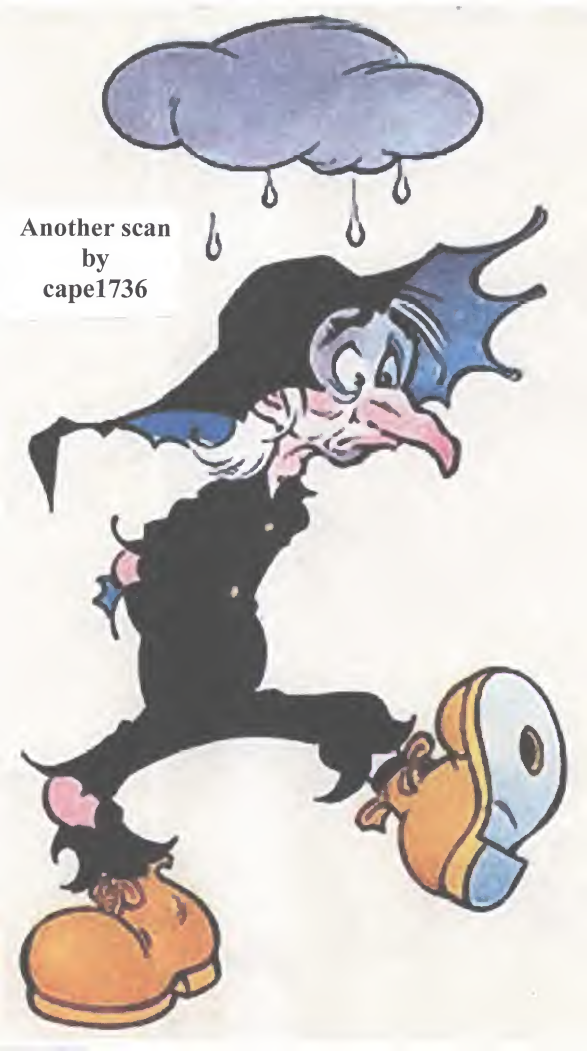
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